

**AT THE SIGN OF
THE SWORD**

AT THE SIGN OF THE SWORD

A STORY OF LOVE AND WAR.
IN BELGIUM

BY

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At the Sign of the Sword

CHAPTER I

THE WATERS OF THE MEUSE

WARM, brilliant, and cloudless was the July noon.

Beneath the summer sun the broad, shallow waters of the Meuse sparkled as they rippled swiftly onward through the deep, winding valley of grey rocks and cool woods on their way from the mountains of Lorraine, through peaceful, prosperous Belgium, towards the sea.

That quiet, smiling land of the Ardennes was, in July in the year of grace 1914, surely one of the most romantic in all Europe—a green, peaceful land, undisturbed by modern progress; a land where the peasantry were still both honest and simple, retaining many of their primitive customs; a land where the herdsmen still called home the cattle by the blast of the horn as they had done for past centuries, where the feudal castles studding the country—mostly now in ruins—were once the abodes of robber-knights.

In that long, deep green valley, which wound from Namur up past Dinant to the French frontier at Givet, the people had advanced but little. Legend and history, poetry and fiction, provoked an interesting reminiscence at almost every turn, for it was,

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indeed, a land that fascinated those used to the mad hurry of our modern money-making life.

Not far from quaint, old-world Dinant, with its church with the slate-covered, bulgy spire nestling beneath its fortress-crowned rock, its narrow cobbled streets, and its picturesque little Place, lay the pretty riverside village of Anseremme, the favourite resort of artists, being situated at the junction of the Lesse—one of the loveliest of rivers—with the Meuse.

Seated at a shaded table eating their *déjeuner*, upon the rose-embowered *terrasse* of the unpretending little Hôtel Beau Séjour, which ran beside the rippling Meuse, sat a young man with a girl.

That the pair had met clandestinely was apparent to the white-aproned *patron*—who also acted as *chef*—from the fact that the young man had arrived on foot with rather dusty boots an hour before, had seated himself, ordered an *aperatif* and idled somewhat impatiently over the *Indépendance Belge*, until, from the direction of Givet, a fine grey car, sweeping along the road and raising a cloud of dust, suddenly pulled up before the hotel. From it a well-dressed young girl had alighted, and as she passed on to the *terrasse*, the young man had sprang up, uttered a loud cry of welcome, and bent over her hand.

Meanwhile, the chauffeur had discreetly moved on to the Hôtel de la Meuse, where he apparently intended to get his luncheon.

The young girl was distinctly handsome, as she sat leaning her elbows upon the table, gazing into her companion's eyes, and bending forward to listen to the low words he was uttering. She was little more than twenty, with dark hair, regular, well-chiselled

features ; a small, pretty mouth, which puckered when she smiled ; soft, delicate cheeks, and a pair of those great, dark-brown liquid eyes, which are so characteristically Belgian. Her dark-blue serge gown was a model of tailored neatness, while her little, close-fitting hat, in black straw, suited admirably a delicate, refined face, about which there could be no two opinions.

The poise of her head, the white, delicate throat, discreetly open, and upon which hung a beautiful diamond and pearl pendant ; the smallness of her white, ungloved hands, and the daintiness of her grey suede shoes and silk stockings to match, all combined to produce a *chic* which was that of one living in a smart circle of the *haut monde*.

Both speech and gesture betrayed an education in France, for her accent was not of the Bruxellois but, like her graceful bearing, that of the true Parisienne.

She was laughing merrily at some remark the young man had made, and in her eyes, as they fixed themselves upon his, there showed the love-light—that one expression that can never be feigned by any man or woman in the world.

Her companion, a dark, oval-faced, well-set-up young fellow, was under thirty, above the average height for a Belgian, perhaps, with a pair of keen, shrewd eyes, in which was a kindly, sympathetic look, closely trimmed hair, and a small dark moustache cut in English fashion. He was broad-shouldered, strong, and manly, and by his gesture and attitude the keen observer would have marked that he had had more military training than was usual in the circle in Brussels in which he moved. He was dressed in a

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suit of well-cut grey tweeds, with straw hat, while the silver watch set in the well-worn leather wristlet gave him an altogether English air. Indeed, he had lived five years in London—in lodgings in Shepherd's Bush—when a student, and, as a consequence, spoke English fairly well.

That they were a handsome pair Monsieur le Patron of the hotel, quizzing them through the low-set window of his kitchen which looked out upon the *terrasse*, could not disguise from himself. Often he had seen the big car sweep past, but of its ownership he was in ignorance. Yet more than once the interesting pair had met at his hotel and had lunched quietly together, while signs had not been wanting that those meetings were in secret.

Jules, the little bald-headed waiter from Rochefort, had flicked out the white cloth and spread it between them; he had placed two yard-long loaves crosswise upon it, with serviettes flat upon the plates and single knives and forks, when Aumée, with a light musical laugh, exclaimed in French :

· “I had the greatest difficulty to get away to-day, Edmond. At the very last moment I feared lest I should disappoint you. My mother wanted some lace from Teitz's, in Brussels, and I, of course, last night volunteered to go shopping for her. But this morning, while I was taking my *petit déjeuner*, Mélanie came to me to say that mother had made up her mind to come with me, as she wanted to see the Countess d'Echternach before she went to England. She and her husband are taking their yacht to Cowes, and we had been asked to join the party, as you know, but father unfortunately is kept at home because of important meetings of the Senate.”

"Then your mother, the Baroness, may suspect—eh?" exclaimed Edmond Valentin with some apprehension.

"No. I think not," reflected the girl. "But at first I didn't know what to do. I knew that by that time you had already left Brussels, and I could not telephone and stop you. Suddenly I recollected that mother has a bad memory, so presently I reminded her of a purely fictitious engagement she had made with the Committee of the Archæological Society of Antwerp on that day, and succeeded in inducing her to remain to receive the Burgomaster and his antiquarian friends, to whom her father had granted a permit to see over the Château."

"And so you succeeded in escaping!" he laughed; "and instead of shopping in Brussels and lunching with old Madame Garnier, you are here. Splendid!" Then, glancing round to reassure himself that nobody was present, his fingers tenderly closed over the tiny hand which lay upon the tablecloth.

"But, dearest," he went on in French, with a grave expression in his kind, dark eyes, "when you did not come at eleven o'clock I began to fear—fear what I am, alas! always fearing——"

"What?" she asked quickly.

He hesitated for a few seconds.

"That somebody may have discovered the truth, and told the Baron—Aimée," he replied very slowly.

"Really, Edmond, I don't see what there is to fear. I know you have enemies, and further, that my father does not view you in exactly a friendly spirit, simply because you are not rich, like Arnaud——"

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"Arnaud Rigaux!" interrupted Edmond angrily. "I hate to hear the very name of the fellow! Your father, the Baron, wishes you to marry him, in order to cement the two greatest financial houses in Belgium—that of Neuville Frères and the Banque de Tervueren. Besides, he must be at least thirty years your senior, Aimée."

"This is really unkind of you, Edmond," exclaimed the girl in reproach, withdrawing her hand. "I came to meet you, so that we might spend a pleasant day in the country. Surely you believe that I love you, and that being so, how could I possibly consent to marry Monsieur Rigaux?"

"But I am only a mere obscure Brussels lawyer, Aimée," he said. "How can I ever hope to marry you?"

The girl did not reply. Her heart was too full for mere words. They were alone upon that shady *terrasse*, with the great river swirling and rippling past them, while at the moment the quiet was broken by the sweet carillon of old church bells somewhere, chiming the hour of noon.

"I know, my darling," he said in a low voice, in English, so that none should overhear and understand, as he looked at her across the table, "that your father and his friends hold the money-strings of our little nation. They reckon the world by its millions of francs, and the finances of Belgium are in their hands. He will make the most strenuous effort to force you to marry Rigaux, and so strengthen the position of both houses."

"I will never marry the man—*never*!" Aimée de Neuville declared emphatically in good English. "I hate him!"

"You swear¹ that?" he demanded quickly, a fierce light suddenly in his eyes.

"I do, Edmond."

"Ah!" he sighed in deep relief. "Then I am satisfied. Let us discuss the subject no further."

And at that moment old Jules reappeared with the plate of tempting *hors d'œuvres* and the *carafe* of *vin-blanc ordinaire*.

Edmond Valentin, the *avocat*, who struggled hard and fought for small fees in that most palatial Palais de Justice in the world, sat for a few moments gazing thoughtfully across the broad sunlit Meuse, where, on the opposite bank, a train, looking like a small toy, was following the bend of the river on its way to France, leaving a long trail of white smoke behind. He was thinking—thinking of something he knew—a secret—and as it arose in his mind his strong hands clenched themselves tightly beneath the table.

The girl, watching his countenance, wondered when she saw that strange expression of fierce hatred flit across his broad brow. But next second it had vanished, and smiling upon her, he began to help her to the anchovies and salad which the bald-headed waiter had placed before them.

They were truly a striking pair, she pretty and dainty, with a soft, sweet expression that men always found so charming, while he was particularly smart and handsome, without the slightest trace of foreign effeminacy, a fine, well-set-up fellow, who, but for the depth and largeness of his eyes, might easily have been mistaken for an Englishman. Yet their social positions were wide as the poles. She was the only child of Baron Henri de Neuville, the great financier, whose money controlled railways and tram-

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'ways in half a dozen countries in Europe, and whose splendid old Château de Sévérac, higher up the river, was one of the show-places of Belgium. Ex-Minister of Finance and a member of the Senate, his position gave his wife, the Baroness, and her daughter, the *entrée* to the Court circle in Brussels, hence Aimée moved in the most exclusive set.

Her companion, however, was the son of the late Burgomaster of Ghent, an estimable man, who had amassed a considerable fortune and possessed much land around Antwerp, but who had, with hundreds of others, been completely ruined by dabbling in a wild-cat scheme on the Congo, and who had died penniless, save for the little pittance which his son Edmond could afford him.

Love, however, laughs at money-bags, and Aimée, while she was passionately fond of the man before her, detested that thin-faced, black-haired, narrow-eyed man, Monsieur Rigaux, whose praises the Baroness was so constantly singing when they sat at table together. There was an indescribable look in the financier's eyes which had, for the past four years—ever since she returned from school at Rocdean—always frightened her. It was an expression which, though with her woman's intuition she distrusted, yet she could neither describe it, nor the feeling which it always aroused within her. What we too often term natural antipathy, is a silent, mysterious warning which springs from our innermost conscience, and surely should never be dismissed.

The little cloud which had descended between the pair had quickly lifted, and as they sat eating their *déjeuner*, childishly happy in each other's love, two officers of the 8th Chasseurs, in their braided tunics

and undress caps, came along the *terrasse*, and, seeing a lady, saluted as they passed, and took seats at a little table at the farther end.

"My old regiment!" Edmond remarked. "Sometimes, Aimée, I regret that I resigned to take up law," he added, with a sigh and a wistful look as he glanced at the two men in uniform.

"But you are making a name at the Courts," the girl declared. "I read in the paper yesterday a case in which you are defending—the *Affaire* of the Rue du Trône, they call it—a murder-mystery."

"Yes," the man answered, with a touch of bitterness in his voice. "I am defending the man Sigart, though I myself am convinced of his guilt."

"And yet you defend him?"

Edmond Valentin shrugged his shoulder.

"An advocate is forced to serve whichever side engages him," he replied. "That is why the profession of arms is so much more honest"

"Granted," his companion said. "It gives you an *entrée* to the better houses—you can become a member of the *Cercle Militaire*, and all that, but is it not all useless? The war, which has been predicted all these years, has never come—nor, in my belief, will it ever come. Germany only raises a bogey from time to time, in order to terrify Europe, as my father puts it," the girl added.

"Ah! I fear the Baron is a little too optimistic," replied her lover. "War, when it comes—as it most assuredly will—will come in the hour when we least expect it. Then, when the Teuton hordes burst their bonds, woe betide the nations they attack."

"Well, Edmond, we have one consolation, that they will never attack us. We are neutral, and the

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Powers—even Germany herself—have agreed to respect our neutrality.”

“Ah, Aimée, that remains to be seen,” was his slow, apprehensive reply. “Germany, when she fights, will fight for world-wide power, irrespective of treaties or of agreements. The Kaiser is the great War Lord, and his intention is to vindicate his self-assumed title, and to rule the world ”

“Father, who is behind the scenes of international politics, quite disputes that view.”

“The Baron will not admit it—nobody in Belgium will admit it—because no cloud appears to-day upon the political horizon. But the dark cloud will arise ere long, depend upon it, and then we shall, every man of us, be compelled to fight for our lives, and for all we hold most dear.”

A silence fell between them. The young man slowly stirred his coffee, and then, taking a cigarette from his case, lit it, with a word of apology at having expressed such words of warning, and daring to disagree with the view held by the Baron de Neuville.

“But do you really fear war, Edmond ?” asked the girl at last, having reflected deeply upon her lover’s words.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to alarm you, dearest,” he laughed quickly. “War will, I believe, break out in Europe ; but not yet—probably not for years to come. Germany is not ready ; and besides, she fears both France and England. Nevertheless, she is preparing to conquer the world. Of that, one has evidence everywhere in Germany.”

“My father does not believe it.”

“Because, like so many others all the world over who are piling up their money and reaping rich dividends,

he does not wish to believe it. He, like millions of others, is content in the blissful paradise which he himself creates. But there, dearest, enough of my controversial subjects. Let us enjoy this glorious day," and he blew a cloud of blue cigarette smoke from his lips, and laughed at her merrily across the little coffee-cup which he raised to his lips.

Then presently, Edmond having settled the account, the blissful pair entered the great grey car, in which Antoine, the Baron's clean-shaven chauffeur, loyal to his young mistress, drove them rapidly away, up the white, winding road which led due east into the heart of the peaceful, picturesque Ardennes.

CHAPTER II

THE RISING CLOUD

A fortnight later—the second day of August, to be exact.

The Taverne Joseph, that popular restaurant in the Boulevard d'Anspach, in Brussels, where, beneath the shadow of the Bourse, the business-man gets such delicious *plats du jour*, was crowded, as it always is each day at noon. The many little tables set out upon the pavement, along which the life of the bright little Belgian capital ebbed and flowed, were filled by men who daily, year in and year out, ate their midday meal, gossiped, and drank long glasses of iced *bock*.

At one table, in a corner by the glass screen which divided the pavement before Joseph's establishment from that belonging to a restaurant next door, Edmond Valentin sat alone.

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He had every reason to congratulate himself most heartily. An hour ago, after making a most brilliant and impassioned speech for the defence in the Assize Court, the trial of the *Affaire* of the Rue du Trône had at last ended. The chemist's assistant, Sigart, a cruel-hearted assassin who had killed his young wife by administering gelsiminium—as the prosecution had alleged—had been acquitted, and upon Edmond's remarkable success he had been everywhere congratulated by his *confrères* in the great atrium of the Courts.

As he sat alone, idly watching the passers-by, he was wondering what Aimée would think. She would read in the *Petit Bleu* that night the account of the trial, which she was so closely following, he knew. What would she say when she saw that he had been successful—that he had made a name in the legal world at last!

He was in the act of lighting a cigarette, one of a special brand of Egyptians which were sold only at the little *kiosque* in the courtyard of the Grand Hotel opposite, when a strident voice reached his ear, and next second a perspiring young vendor of newspapers, in a peaked cap, thrust under his nose a newspaper, crying in French, "German Ultimatum to Belgium!—*V'la Le Journal!*" He paid his sou, and eagerly opened the thin damp sheet.

His quick eyes scanned the sinister news which the paper contained, to the effect that the German Minister in Brussels had, at seven o'clock on the previous evening, offered Belgium an *entente* with Germany in return for her facilitating German military operations. A pistol was held at Belgium's head. She had been given till seven o'clock that morning to

reply. A Council Meeting had been held which had lasted till midnight, after which Messieurs Hymans and Van den Heuvel had drafted a reply, which for three hours further had been discussed. Belgium relied upon the treaty to which Germany herself had been signatory, guaranteeing her neutrality, and had therefore replied that she could not accept the proposal.

Edmond Valentin held his breath as he read those significant lines of print.

Half the men in the restaurant eagerly bought papers, were silent for a moment, and then the greatest excitement was apparent everywhere.

"*War with Germany!*" yelled the newsvendors in strident tones as they rushed along the Boulevard, and even the police—the most correct in Europe—were so dumbfounded that they did not raise a voice in protest at this unseemly breach of the regulation which prohibits the crying of news.

Belgium had defied the great and terrible machine of Prussian militarism. She had told the Kaiser, openly and plainly, that she would, like Holland, remain neutral, in accordance with the solemn treaty to which the Powers had put their signatures.

"Well, my friend," remarked a fat stockbroker, to whom Valentin was known as having his lunch daily at the Joseph. "This is defiance—eh? We have held up our hand to stop the great War Lord of Germany. We have no quarrel with our neighbours. This is only newspaper gossip. There will be no war, I assure you. A Bourse canard—perhaps."

"But if Germany attacks us?" queried the young lawyer, placing his newspaper on the table.

"Bah! that she will never do. We know the

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Kaiser and his mailed fist of old. If Russia has mobilised, surely it cannot concern us ! ”

“ But France and Great Britain are Russia’s allies, remember.”

“ Exactly. Germany will never dare to face Europe with only Austria, an effete nation, as an ally. Your agreement supports mine, my dear friend,” laughed the fat over-dressed man, who wore a large diamond in his cravat.

“ But are there not already violations of the French frontier, and also in Luxembourg ? The Germans have also occupied frontier towns in Russia,” Edmond argued.

“ *Bien !* But it is only a menace on the part of Germany—and menace is not war. Do not forget the Agadir incident. No, no, m’sieur. The coming war is not yet—not yet, although I quite admit that we have felt the unrest on the Bourse this morning.”

“ Unrest ! ” echoed Edmond. “ I tell you that to-day there is war in the air, m’sieur ! The German Emperor has created, by his clever chicanery, a diplomatic position in Europe which is impossible. The preparations of Prussia are complete. That the Emperor means war is apparent to those who have studied events, as I have, ever since the deplorable assassinations in Sarajevo.”

“ Ah ! *mon ami*, I see you are pessimistic,” laughed the stockbroker, draining his glass of Benedictine. “ It would be bad for Belgium if all her sons were alarmists like yourself.”

“ No, m’sieur, pardon ! ” was Edmond Valentin’s quick response. “ If all were like yourself, we should be lulled to sleep by the assurances of our bitter

enemy—the enemy who intends to march through this capital of ours to Antwerp, and the sea.”

“Bah! The old story told to us for so many years!” laughed the man at the next table as he rose slowly and took his straw hat. “We shall meet here again—say this day week, and then you will be forced to admit the truth of my argument.”

“Well—let us hope so, m’sieur. We shall see,” Valentin replied with a gesture of apprehension, which showed him to be concerned.

The fat man wished him a merry “*bon jour*,” and passed out upon the sun-baked pavement, where the excited crowds were now hurrying, eagerly discussing the alarming news.

“War! War! WAR!”

The word was upon everyone’s lips throughout the length and breadth of the animated little capital of *les braves Belges*—the people so long sneered at by their superiors in Paris until the very expression had become synonymous of a populace actuated by timid arrogance, and who merely aped all the culture and most of the vices of the Parisians.

When the optimistical stockbroker had gone, Edmond again took up his paper and read how Sir Edward Grey had made a statement in the House of Commons, in London, regarding the obligations of honour, and of national security involved in the maintenance by Great Britain of Belgian neutrality. France and Russia were already in a state of war with Germany. Would Great Britain stand by Belgium?

Upon the *terrace* of the crowded restaurant and within, the sole topic of the excited conversation was the seriousness of the situation. Old men who had been scared times without number by the war-clouds

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which had risen over Europe, laughed to scorn the idea of a great conflict.

"My dear Jules!" shouted a thin-faced, white-bearded man—the head of a great commercial house—across the restaurant. "Do not give it another thought. There will be no war. The Germans are not yet ready, and the diplomats will arrange it all, as they always do. They are paid for it. The Kaiser's bark is worse than his bite."

Whereat many laughed.

But not so Edmond Valentin. He had been a close student of international politics, and in order to supplement his income at the criminal bar, he had often written articles upon international politics for the *Indépendance Belge*, and the *Matin* of Antwerp. What he had feared and predicted was, alas! coming rapidly true.

Germany, with her horde of spies everywhere in Belgium, France, and England, and her closely guarded military and naval secrets had deceived Europe. She was fully prepared—and her Emperor intended to make war, and to crush civilisation beneath the despotic heel of Prussian militarism. The cross of Christ was to be overthrown by the brutal agnosticism of Nietzsche, the blasphemous "philosopher" who died in a madhouse.

Edmond Valentin held his breath, and replacing the paper again upon the table, while the buzz of dispute and argument was still in his ears, stared straight before him into the busy, glaring thoroughfare.

War! War! WAR!

At length he rose, and making his way blindly to the Bourse, only a few steps away, he boarded one of

the open-air trams, and ascended the steep, winding streets, the narrow Marche aux Herbes, and the Rue de la Madeline, until he reached the broad Rue de la Régence, which led straight up to the great façade of the domed Palais de Justice. Half-way up the street he alighted and, entering a block of offices, ascended to his bureau.

The city was agog with excitement. In that hot, blazing noontide, everyone seemed outside discussing the grave peril in which Belgium was now placed by daring to stem the overwhelming tide of Teutons.

"If they come they will not hurt us," a man in the tram had laughed. "They will simply march through Belgium—that is all. What on earth have we to fear?"

Edmond had overheard those words. They represented the opinion of the populace, who had been frightened by the bogey of threatened war so many times, until now they had grown to regard the regularly rising cloud over Europe as part of the German policy, the brag and swagger of the great War Lord.

Edmond was alone. His one clerk was still away at his *déjeuner* as usual, from noon till two o'clock. From the open window of the small, dingy room he watched the animated scene below—watched like a man in a dream.

At the moment he was not thinking of the threatened war, but of the man Arnaud Rugaux.

An imprecation escaped his set teeth, as his face assumed a dark, threatening expression, his strong hands clenched, as they always did when certain thoughts arose.

"One day ere long," he murmured, "we will settle the account between us, m'sieur. With us it

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is an eye for an eye, but you little dream what form my revenge will take. The hour is now fast approaching—depend upon it ! ”

Turning suddenly from the window, he lit a cigarette, for, like most Belgians, he was an inveterate smoker as well as something of a dandy in his attire, and seating himself at his big writing-table he began to scribble hastily memorandum after memorandum.

For fully two hours he continued.

Old André, his clerk, returned, and placed a copy of a newspaper containing the report of the *Affaire* of the Rue du Trône at his elbow, saying :

“ The Press are full of your praise, m’sieur. Is it not splendid—magnificent ! ”

But his master took no heed, so intent was he upon his writing, referring to various bundles of legal papers before him, as he scribbled on.

Then, at last, just before four o’clock, he put on his hat and went forth again, walking to the Palais de Justice, where, after searching through the courts, he found, in the dark panelled Court of Appeal, a *confrère* of his—a tall, thin man, with a bushy black beard. His friend congratulated him heartily upon his success in the *cause célèbre* that morning, after which they both went out into the atrium and sat upon a bench, while Edmond Valentin gave him a number of instructions.

Afterwards, just before five, Edmond emerged again, crossed into the wide, leafy Avenue Louise, and boarding a tram, rode straight up that splendid boulevard of fine private residences, to the gates of the pretty natural park of which Bruxellois are so proud, the Bois de la Cambre. Upon a seat in one of the secluded paths, not far from the entrance,

he found Aimée, dressed in white embroidered muslin, awaiting him.

"Ah, Edmond!" she cried, springing up. "Terrible, is it not? There will be war! You were right—quite right—dearest. Germany intends to encroach upon our land!"

"Yes, darling," he replied, bending over her little gloved hand with deep apology at being late. "I fear that it is so, and that we shall be compelled to defend ourselves," he sighed. "The terror of war is upon us."

"But there will not be fighting in Belgium—surely?" the girl declared. "Colonel Maclean, the British military attaché, was at lunch with us to-day, and he told my father that England did not anticipate war. It is only the German nature to be aggressive against Russia."

"Ah! no. Do not believe the optimists, my darling," the man said, seating himself at her side. "Do not believe in the soft words and the self-styled culture of the Germans. They are the natural enemies of Europe, and the camarilla of Potsdam intends now to fight for world-power."

She was silent, tracing a semicircle on the gravel with the ferrule of her white silk sunshade.

It was a pretty, leafy nook where they were sitting—a spot where it was often their habit to meet in secret when she was in Brussels. That big white mansion of the Baron Henri de Neuville he had passed half-way up the Avenue Louise was one of the largest and most handsome private residences in Brussels, with its imposing gates of ornamental ironwork surmounted by a gilt coronet, and huge glass-covered winter-garden—a place pointed out to *messieurs*, the tourists

of the Agence Cook, who passed daily in the motor char-à-banc, as the "town-house of the Baron de Neuville, the great Belgian millionaire," as the uniformed guide put it each morning in his parrot-like English, when he conducted his charges on their way to the field of Waterloo.

"Do you know, Aimée," exclaimed her companion seriously at last, "I have decided to return to my old regiment, and to act my part—the part of a true Belgian. I can at once return as *sous-officier*."

"What?" gasped the girl in quick alarm. "But, Edmond—you—you—you might be wounded if war really broke out! You might even be killed! No! For my sake, dear, don't go," she implored, placing her trembling little hand upon his arm and looking up appealingly into his eyes.

"War will be upon us, if not to-day, then to-morrow. My place is in the ranks of the defenders," he said firmly. "I have no money-bags to protect, as your father the Baron has. My profession will be at an end with war, hence I have decided. I have made all arrangements for my friend Verbruggen to take my cases in the Courts."

"And you will really rejoin the Chasseurs-à-pied?" she asked anxiously.

"I shall. It is only my duty, dearest. Against the great Germany our little Belgium will require every man who can hold a rifle," replied her lover. "The German Kaiser means war—and war means the shedding of blood in our land."

"But think—if you were killed, Edmond!" she gasped, staring at him.

"I should at least die knowing that we loved each other, darling," he answered, taking her hand ten-

derly in his own and raising it to his lips. "You are mine, and I am yours; only death can part us."

He glanced up and down. They were alone in that narrow, leafy way, with the buds twittering gaily above them, and the hot sunshine filtering through the branches; for the charm of the Bois was its rural picturesqueness, near as it was to the centre of the gay, vivacious little capital.

His arm stole very slowly around her waist, and she fell back into his embrace in the supreme ecstasy of that moment.

"Though the barrier between us—the barrier of money—is insurmountable, Aimée, I love you better—ah! better than my own life, sweetheart. To-day, though the sun still shines over our dear Belgium, it is, alas! the darkest day of our history. The terror of the Uhlan is already over our land. Your father, the Baron, will, I know, endeavour to snatch you from me, and marry you to the man whom I have so just a cause to hate—enemy as he is of my own race, my name, my country. But, darling, I refuse, in this hour of deadly peril, to remain inactive. I love you, and, my darling, I know that you love me. Our dear country is threatened by the invader, who intends to smash and to crush us, to sweep our smiling, peaceful land with fire and sword; to stamp out our national life, and to grind us beneath the millstones of a blasphemous autocracy. And, as an officer of the Belgian army, my place is with my regiment—to defend our country; to defend our innocent women—to defend you, my own beloved."

Tears welled in her great dark eyes as she listened to his words, and he bent until his lips pressed hers.

His argument was complete. How could she pro-

test further? Her secret lover was a fine, manly man—far more manly than any she had ever met in her own select circle of that vain bejewelled society, where mammon was god, and where finance daily juggled with the destiny of nations.

To rejoin his regiment was, after all, her lover's duty. She knew it in her innermost consciousness. Yes, he was right. Though a lieutenant, he could rejoin as *sous-officier*. The war-cloud, so black and lowering, must burst within a few hours.

As a true daughter of Belgium she was at heart a patriot, even though, in her own home, the only patriotism ever taught her had been the love of self-esteem.

He was silent, not daring to utter further word; and she, looking into his dark, thoughtful, serious eyes, in silence, wept.

Yet in the ears of both of them rang that single word of such awful and such fatal significance:

War! War! WAR!

CHAPTER III

THE HEART'S DESIRE

At ten o'clock on the same evening the Baron Henri de Neuville sat smoking a cigar in a small, luxuriously furnished room in the great white mansion in the Avenue Louise.

A broad-shouldered, grey-haired, slightly bald man, whose heavy jaws were fringed by short grey side-whiskers, and whose deep-set eyes were rendered darker by the natural pallor of his complexion. His

hair was well brushed to hide his baldness, and in his well-cut evening clothes he looked younger than he really was. He had been commanded to the Palace earlier in the evening, for the King had consulted him in connection with some secret financial transaction affecting the nation, and therefore at his throat he wore the ribbon and cross of the Order of Leopold.

With him sat his friend, Arnaud Rigaux, a dandified thin-faced man, a few years his junior, with black hair plastered down upon his head, a pair of narrow-set beady eyes, a countenance of distinctly Hebrew cast, and a small pointed black moustache, unmistakably dyed. The shrivelled thinness of his hands was certainly not in keeping with the artificial youth of his face, and, on second glance, the most casual observer would have realised that he was one of those men who, by reason of a fast life, have aged prematurely, and who endeavour to remain young, and believe themselves still attractive to the fair sex.

He had, in years past, been a rather handsome man. But the life he had led had left its mark indelibly upon him, for he looked what he was, a *roué* who had run the whole gamut of the gaieties of Europe, from the Casino at Aix to the Villa Regala at Bucharest, and from the haunts of the *demi-monde* on the Riviera to the night-café of Berlin and the *cabarets* of the Montmartre.

As he lounged back in the big, soft, saddle-bag chair, the fine diamond glistening in his shirt, he presented a picture of the affluent parvenu, that type of wealthy financier of Hebrew strain, which is so familiar the world over.

The Baron was certainly of a refined and gentle-

manly type, though there was in his face that shrewd, hard expression which seems inseparable from the financial mind. Yet his companion was of an entirely different stamp—coarse, unsympathetic, with sensuality stamped upon his loose lips.

He removed the cigar from his mouth, and lifting his narrow eyes to his companion, remarked :

"I am relieved to hear your opinion, my dear Henri. It agrees entirely with mine. Though the Bourses show signs of panic, I cannot but think that war is impossible."

"The Minister Orts was at the Palace, and I had a few words with him," the Baron said. "They had, at the Ministry, a telegram from our Minister in London only an hour ago. War is not anticipated there."

"Nor here—only by the ignorant," laughed Rigaux. "Germany cannot—nay, she dare not—attack Europe."

"It is whispered that the King has appealed to King George of England to uphold our neutrality. But in one or two quarters I hear it alleged that the fixed purpose to provoke a general war has underlain Germany's policy for many years, and now, with Austria as her ally, she has wantonly flung down the gauntlet to all Europe."

"I don't believe it at all," declared the other. "The Kaiser cannot commit such an outrage on all justice and all public right. Our neutrality was guaranteed by Germany herself. How can she dishonour her own signature ?"

"But Germany aspires to supremacy, we must not forget, my dear friend—and to supremacy as complete as that claimed by Napoleon. She intends that all

the other Powers shall be her subordinate allies. She would drag them all in her wake."

"Bah! England will not bargain away to Germany her obligations to us, depend upon it," was the other's reply. "The Kaiser fears the British fleet. He is not yet ready, my dear Baron. So let us dismiss the so-called peril, for it does not exist, I assure you."

The Baron rose from his chair, and stepped out upon the long balcony into the close, breathless night.

A regiment of Lancers were clattering along the broad avenue, just distinguishable among the trees, and the people were cheering wildly as they passed.

War was in the air. Notwithstanding the assurances of his friend Rigaux, the Baron could not disguise from himself the serious apprehension that had so suddenly arisen in his mind. Hitherto, he had been loudest in his expressions that war would not be yet, but since he had been at the Palace, an hour ago, and seen the serious expression upon the faces of his sovereign, and of certain officials, he had become suspicious of the worst.

What if England defied this sabre-rattling of Germany, and declared war to protect Belgium? He pondered as he stood there, glancing down into the leafy avenue where the people were shouting, "*A bas les Allemands!*"

He had his back turned to his friend, who still sat smoking. Had he turned, he might, however, have seen something which would have aroused wonder within him, for while he stood there, looking down upon the straight, leafy way, bright under its lines of lamps, his friend, behind his back, had clenched his fists fiercely. Arnaud Rigaux's teeth were set, and upon his countenance was a fierce look of

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hatred of the man whom he was trying to lull into a false sense of security.

A distinctly evil expression played about the corners of his sensuous mouth, as his narrow-set eyes glinted with the fire of a detestation which, until that moment, he had so cleverly concealed.

Though posing as an intensely patriotic Belgian, he was, if the truth be told, one of the few men in Brussels who knew the German intentions, and who, for a fortnight past, had been fully prepared.

War must come, he was well aware. It had all been arranged two years ago, yet the Belgian Government, and even the Baron de Neuville, its chief financial adviser, had remained in utter ignorance. They had never suspected the Kaiser's treachery.

Rigaux smiled as he reflected how cleverly the secret of it all had been kept. Great Britain must now certainly fall into the trap so cunningly prepared for her, and then Europe would, as the Kaiser intended, be drenched in blood.

In those moments, while the Baron stood outside, he reflected upon the private audience he had had with the Emperor at Potsdam nine months before, of the secret reports he had furnished regarding the financial situation of Belgium, and other matters, and the preparations for war in Luxembourg and along the frontier, which were revealed to him by a high official in the Wilhelmstrasse. He had returned from his "business-visit" to Berlin, and not a soul in Brussels had ever dreamed that he had been received by the Most Highest. The secret policy of the Kaiser was to court the good-will of certain financiers who, most of them, willingly became his agents and cats'-paws, and kept the War Office in

Berlin well informed of the trend of events. It was so in the case of the clever, wealthy, and unscrupulous Arnaud Rigaux.

The Baron turned, but in an instant the face of his friend reassumed its expression of easy-going carelessness.

"This silly war-scare seems to please the people—eh?" he laughed aloud. "Hark at them shouting! It is to be hoped they will not attack the German Legation, burn the German flag, or commit some ridiculous outrage of that sort."

"Let's hope not, or it might be misconstrued into an act of war," the Baron agreed, as he stepped again into the small, cosy, but exquisitely furnished room. "Probably the Garde Civile have taken every precaution to avoid demonstrations. Nevertheless," he added, "I do not like the outlook at all, my dear Arnaud. I confess I do not like it at all."

"*Mon cher ami*, surely you, of all men, are not being led away by this sensation in the newspapers!" exclaimed his friend, pursing his thick lips. "We both know the value to be placed upon *messieurs les journalistes*. We buy them all whenever we desire their favour—do we not?"

But the Baron cast himself into his chair and shook his head gravely, saying:

"I fear, notwithstanding, that the outlook is very black for Belgium. War would mean ruin to us both. We have, both of us, large interests in France and Germany," he added, ignorant of the vile treachery of which his friend had been guilty. "If war came in Europe, I should be ruined."

"Exactly," responded the other. "That is why, in such circumstances as these, a union of our houses

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would be so intensely desirable. Have you spoken to Mademoiselle Aimée again ? ” he asked, regarding the Baron with those narrow, crafty eyes of his.

“ Yes,” was the reply.

“ And what has Mademoiselle said ? ”

“ Up to the present,” sighed the Baron, “ she is still obdurate.”

“ Because of that good-looking *avocat*—eh ? ” he retorted. “ Why do you allow her still to meet the fellow ? ”

“ She does not meet him to my knowledge.”

“ She does—almost daily. I have set watch upon them. They met to-day—in the Bois, at five o’clock.”

The Baron was again silent for a few moments. Then he said :

“ Valentin has, it seems, made quite a sensational success in the Affaire of the Rue du Trône. There is a long account in to-night’s papers. Berton, the Minister of Justice, was speaking of it.”

“ But surely you will not allow your daughter to marry a penniless lawyer ! ” protested the financier. “ Think what you and I could do, if only we amalgamated upon fair and equivalent business lines. As you well know, I am extremely fond of Aimée.”

“ You have spoken to her, she tells me.”

“ I have. But, unfortunately, she treats me with a calm and utter indifference.”

“ Perhaps she will, eventually, grow tired of Edmond Valentin’s attentions,” her father suggested.

“ Never,” growled Rigaux. “ I believe she loves the fellow. But if you were only firm, my dear friend, she would, in the end, consent to marry me.”

“ I am firm.”

"Yet you allow them to meet daily!"

"How can I prevent it?"

"By sending her away—say to England. I will go to England also."

"My own opinion is that you would fare no better in England than here. Aimée is a girl of spirit. She may be led, but driven never," her father declared emphatically.

"But cannot you compel her to give up this man?" urged Rigaux eagerly.

"Have I not tried, for weeks and weeks? Personally, my friend, I don't think you dance attendance sufficiently upon her, if you really mean to win her. She has been spoiled ever since a child, and likes lots of attention."

Arnaud Rigaux's brows narrowed slightly, for he at once realised that what the Baron said was the truth. He had certainly been deficient in his amorous advances, for, truth to tell, he had become so utterly *blasé* that few women nowadays attracted him.

"Yes," he sighed grossly. "Perhaps you are right, Baron. Is she at home this evening?"

"She's alone in the *petit salon*, reading, I believe. My wife is out at dinner with the wife of the Roumanian Minister."

"Then, if there is nothing else for us to discuss, I will go down and spend an hour with her—eh?"

"*Très bien*," acceded the Baron, while Rigaux, casting away his cigar, settled his cravat before a big mirror at the end of the room, smoothed his hair with both his hands, and left.

Passing down the softly carpeted corridor he paused before a door, and opening it entered, to find himself

in a good-sized salon carpeted in Saxe blue, with white enamelled walls and gilt furniture of the style of Louis Quatorze. Over the elegant apartment was suffused a soft light, the source of which was cunningly concealed behind the wide cornice running round the walls, the electric glow being thrown down by the white ceiling itself.

Upon a side-table stood a great silver bowl of La France roses, which filled the room with their fragrance, and near it, in a comfortable *chaise-longue*, reclined Aimée, looking sweet and dainty in a soft, filmy evening-gown of palest carnation pink.

She looked up from her book, startled, as the door opened, and then, recognising her visitor, rose, rather stiffly, to greet him.

"What, all alone, my dear Mademoiselle!" exclaimed Rigaux, as though in surprise, as he bowed over her hand. "I have been chatting with the Baron, but I expected to find Madame here. Well, and what do you think of all this very alarming news—eh?"

"Awful—is it not?" the girl replied, inviting him to a chair.

"The Baron and I have just been discussing it, and we are of opinion that there will be no war. I notice, however, in the papers to-night, a report of Monsieur Valentin's great success in the *Affaire* of the Rue du Trône. I must congratulate him—and yourself."

The girl blushed slightly. It was the first time this man, whom she so heartily hated, had ever mentioned her lover. Indeed, she was not, until that moment, quite certain whether he was aware of her secret—whether the Baron had told him.

"Yes," she managed to reply at last. "It should secure him a foothold in his profession. The papers say that his speech for the defence was apparently one of the most clever and brilliant ever heard in the Courts."

"And you, of course, must be justly proud, eh, Mademoiselle!" he remarked, looking straight into her beautiful eyes.

"Well, I suppose so," she laughed, her fingers toying nervously with the leaves of Bazin's latest romance.

He sighed deeply. Then, after a pause, said:

"Ah! I only wish that you entertained one little thought for me, Aimée—one kindly reflection regarding myself—I who love you so."

And, bending, he stretched forth his hand to seize hers. But she swiftly withdrew it.

"Oh, why return to that subject again, m'sieur?" she protested impatiently. "Its discussion only pains us both. I am fully aware that my father is anxious, for business reasons, that we should marry, but I assure you, once and for all, that I will never accept any man whom I do not love."

"You put it—well, a trifle bluntly, Mademoiselle."

"I only speak the truth, quite openly and frankly," she responded, her big serious eyes turned upon his. "Would you have me accept, and afterwards fool you?"

Her question—a somewhat disconcerting one—held him silent for some moments.

"Remember, Aimée," he said at last, in a deep voice, "I have known you ever since you were a tiny child. I have watched you grow to become a woman, and gradually I have realised that there is

no woman in the whole world whom I love—except your own dear self. Can you doubt me ? ”

And with an earnest expression that was well feigned, he looked straight into her pale, set countenance.

“ No, m’sieur, I do not doubt you,” was the girl’s quiet response, and he fancied he saw her trembling slightly. “ But when, the other day, you asked if I could ever love you, I told you the bare truth—brutal as it may have appeared. Yet I am not mistress of my own heart, and I tell you that I do not love you—I can never love you—*never* ! ”

“ I am too old,” he murmured bitterly.

“ Not that,” she responded, shaking her well-poised head. “ Age matters nothing when a woman really loves.”

“ You love that man Edmond Valentin,” he snapped, almost savagely.

She nodded in the affirmative, but no word escaped her lips.

Arnaud Rigaux set his teeth, and his fingers clenched themselves into his palms. But only for a second, and she, with her eyes cast down upon the carpet, did not detect the fire of hatred which shone, for a second, in his crafty, narrow-set eyes.

Next second his manner entirely changed. He was one of those men whose cunning enables them to conceal their feelings so cleverly that, while they smile and hold out the hand of friendship, murder lurks within their heart. This attribute is, alas ! one of the elements of success in business in our modern days, and is a habit cultivated by the man whom the world admires as “ keen and smart.”

“ But, my darling ! ” he exclaimed, in a voice broken

by an emotion which was so cleverly feigned that it deceived even her woman's sharp observance, "you do not know how very deeply I love you," he declared, bending to her, and again trying to take her hand, which, however, she again snatched away and placed behind her. "All these years I have watched you grow up, and I have longed and longed for the day when I might beg of you to become my wife. Think of what our marriage would mean to you—to your father, the Baron, and to myself. He and I, united, could rule the whole finances of the nation, we could dictate terms to the Chamber, and we should be the greatest power in Belgium—next to his Majesty himself. Surely your position as my wife would be preferable to that of the wife of a poor struggling lawyer, however estimable he may be."

She sat listening without interrupting him. She had heard this man's praises sung daily by her father for so long that at last they now fell upon deaf ears. She listened quite coldly to his outpourings, yet, at the moment, she despised him in her innermost heart.

What Edmond had declared was the bare, naked truth. Arnaud Rigaux was only seeking to gain further personal riches and aggrandisement by doing her the honour of offering her his hand in marriage.

Her anger arose within her as his words fell upon her ears. She had not been blind to his stealthy unscrupulousness, for she remembered how, on one occasion, she had overheard her father upbraid him for participating in some shady financial transaction with some electric tramways in Italy, the details of which she, as a woman, had been unable to follow. But her father's bitter words of reproach had been, to her, all-sufficient. The Baron had told him,

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openly and plainly, that he had swindled the Italian company, and she had always remembered his outspoken words.

The man seated before her suddenly rose, and unable to take her hand because she was holding it behind her, placed his sensuous grasp upon her shoulder, and bent in an attempt to kiss her.

She turned her head swiftly from his fœtid breath. It was nauseous. It caused her a fierce revulsion of feeling.

She sprang up, her eyes aflame in an instant.

"M'sieur Rigaux! This is intolerable!" she protested, drawing herself up in proud defiance. "I wish you to remember who I am, and further, I wish you to go to my father and tell him, that no matter what may happen, no matter what pressure he may place upon me, no matter if I die unmarried, I will never become the wife of Arnaud Rigaux. *You hear!*"

He drew back at this obstinate rebuff—he whose money bought women's smiles from end to end of Europe.

In a second he became apologetic.

"But, Mademoiselle, I——"

"Please leave this room," she ordered, very firmly "If not, I shall ring for the servants. Go!" and she pointed determinedly to the door. "Go! Describe this scene to my father, and tell him from me, once and for all, that I love Edmond Valentin, and that I intend to marry him."

The man's loose lips hardened. He murmured something which the girl could not catch, but she saw in his eyes, for the first time, the light of a fierce and terrible hatred, as he bowed stiffly, and, turning on his heel, took his *congé*, and with a fierce impres-

tion upon his lips strode out of the pretty, artistic room, wherein she stood, an imperious and defiant figure, in the centre of the carpet.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN FROM COLOGNE

Two hours later Arnaud Rigaux entered his small, well-furnished den in the big house on the broad Boulevard de Waterloo, close to the medieval Porte de Hal, that medieval castle-like structure, now the fine Musée d'Armes, known to every traveller in Brussels.

Scarcely had he crossed the threshold when his man, a white-haired, ultra respectable-looking valet, ushered in a rather stout, middle-aged man of military bearing, with fair hair and blue-grey eyes. He was wearing a cap and a motor dust-coat.

"Ah! my dear Guillaume! I must apologise," Rigaux said. "I had no idea you had been waiting for me."

"Your servant was unaware where you were. We telephoned to a dozen places. I arrived from Cologne just after nine o'clock."

Rigaux glanced at the closed door rather apprehensively, and then in a low voice asked:

"What does it all mean?"

"War," replied the other in a whisper. "The Emperor is in Cologne in secret. I had audience with him at three o'clock, and he sent me to you. I have to return at once. I was to tell you that his Majesty wishes for your final report."

For a moment the financier's narrow eyes grew serious, and his lips quivered.

"The reply from England has not yet been received," his visitor went on, speaking in excellent French, though he was undoubtedly German. "But whatever it may be, the result will be the same. Eight Army Corps are moving upon the Luxembourg frontier. They will soon be in Belgium. What a surprise our big howitzers will be for the forts of Namur and Liège—eh?"

And he laughed lightly, chuckling to himself.

Captain Wilhelm von Silberfeld, of the famous Death's Head Hussars, was a trusted messenger of the Kaiser, a man who had performed many a secret mission for his Imperial Master. He was attached to the General Staff in Berlin, and for hours he had sat in the fast two-seated motor-car, travelling swiftly over the hundred and sixty miles or so of long, straight white roads which led from Cologne to the Belgian capital.

"In four days we shall be in Belgium," the German officer whispered. "The Emperor, as you know, decided upon war three months ago, and ever since we have been steadily and carefully making the final preparations. What is the opinion here?"

"The Cabinet meets to-night. The Government do not, even now, believe that Germany really intends to defy Europe, and I, of course, have endeavoured still to lull them to sleep," responded the financier. "But I have not been idle these past three days. My reports are all prepared. The last was written at seven o'clock this evening."

And crossing to a big, heavy book-case, which occupied the whole of one side of the room, he opened one of the glass doors. Then, pulling forward a

section of the books which swung round upon a pivot, there was disclosed the green-painted door of a safe, securely built into the wall. This he opened with a key upon his chain, and from a drawer took out a large envelope filled with papers, which he handed to his visitor.

"All are here?" asked the other.

"Yes. According to instructions I received by courier yesterday, I have prepared the list of names of influential persons in Liège and Louvain—the banks, and what cash I believe them to hold. How are you proceeding in Antwerp?"

"Antwerp is practically a German city. We have, outside the city, six concrete platforms ready for our big howitzers. They were put down two years ago by German residents in their gardens—for the English game of tennis," and he laughed. "Besides, we have three secret wireless installations of wide range communicating with Nauen, as we also have here in Brussels. Is your wireless here in working order?"

"S-s-sh, my friend!" Rigaux said warningly. "I will send Michel out on a pretext, and you shall see. He is loyal, but I trust no man. I never let him know too much."

Then he rang, and his man, white-haired and humble, appeared.

"Michel, go down to the Grand Hotel at once and ask for Monsieur Legrand. Tell him I wish to see him. If he will kindly come up here in a taxi."

"*Bien, m'sieur!*" and the grave-faced servant bowed and withdrew.

A few moments later Arnaud Rigaux took from a drawer in his library table an electric torch and led the way up the great wide staircase, through his own

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bedroom, past a door into a smaller dressing-room, in which was a huge mahogany wardrobe. The door of this he opened, and pushing the back outwards through a line of coats hanging there, a dark opening was revealed. Into this both men passed, finding themselves upon a wooden flight of dusty stairs, up which they ascended for two floors, until they arrived in a long, low attic, beneath the sloping roof of which were suspended, upon porcelain insulators, many thin, black-enamelled wires.

"Come! You shall hear for yourself," Rigaux exclaimed; and passing along to the gable-end of the main wall of the house, he paused before two tables, upon which were set out a most complete set of wireless instruments.

To the uninitiated eye those two tables were filled with a most complicated assortment of weird electrical apparatus connected by india-rubber covered wires. To the expert, however, all was quite clear. On the one table stood a receiving-set of the latest pattern, while upon the other was what is technically known as "a five kilowatt set," which would transmit wireless messages as far as Nauen, the great wireless station near Potsdam, and, indeed, over a radius of nearly a thousand miles. It was a Marconi set, not Telefunken.

Arnaud Rigaux seated himself upon a stool before the receiving-table, while overhead, insulated from the rafters of the roof, were a hundred bare copper wires strung across and across. His example was followed by Captain von Silberfeld, both clamping the double head-telephones over their ears, listening.

Next instant both heard the buzzing ticks of wireless, so weird and uncanny to those uninitiated.

"Da-de, Da-de-da. Da-de, Da-de-da."

It was a call. Then followed the code letters, "B.B.N." with "B.Y.B."

"Hush!" Rigaux exclaimed, glancing at the book at his elbow. "The British Admiralty station at Cleethorpes are calling the battleship *London*."

The big wireless code-book—a book which could be bought in Berne for five francs—lay open before him.

There was a quick response in the 'phones.

"The *London* is off the west coast of Ireland," he remarked, bending with interest. "There's the reply. Here is 'London.'"

He touched the "tuner," one of the round ebonite handles upon a long mahogany box, and next moment a little "click" of quite a different note was heard in the head 'phones.

"Listen!" Rigaux exclaimed, and then for a moment he was again all attention. "Marseilles is speaking to one of your North German Lloyd liners on her way from Alexandria." Then he paused. "Are you satisfied that I am leaving to your army a complete set, quite in working order—eh?"

"Entirely. Why, it is splendid," declared the captain, who, though he had no expert knowledge of wireless, had seen quite enough to convince him that the secret installation was practically perfect. "This," he added, "will surely be of great use to us before many weeks are over. It is splendid!"

"Let us descend," Rigaux said. "Michel may now be back. This part of the house is, of course, unknown to my servants."

When they were again back in the financier's snug little business room, wherein he received visitors privately, he asked earnestly:

"Tell me, Count, is all complete?"

"Everything. We shall advance to-morrow, or next day. We have mobilised secretly, though Europe is in entire ignorance. First Belgium is to be occupied—then we shall cross to England. Paris is only a secondary affair. London is our chief goal. We shall crush for ever the arrogant English with our Zeppelins and our submarines. Oh! what an unpleasant surprise they will have!" and he laughed.

"But you will not conquer Belgium—eh?"

"Not if she offers no defence. If she does, then I tell you—in confidence—the Kaiser means to sweep this country with fire and sword; we shall wipe villages and towns completely out of existence, so as to strike terror and horror into the heart of Europe. War is war, you know."

"Do you advise me to leave Brussels?"

"Well, not yet—wait and see. Your safety is assured. You already have your safe-conduct, have you not?"

"That has already been arranged."

"His Majesty told me to give you his Imperial assurance. The final draft in your favour on the Dresdner Bank has been passed, and you will receive it in due course, paid into your bank in London," replied the German officer.

"But what do you advise me to do, my friend? Remember, I may yet be discovered as having assisted you. And it will be awkward—very awkward!"

"Remain here for a time, and then go back to the coast. You can, as a patriotic Belgian, always cross from Ostend to England as a wealthy refugee—when the time arrives. And that will not be very long. I assure you," he added, with a grim smile. "The

brave Belgians have to-day ended their career. Our big howitzers will come along. Pouf! and Belgium is no more. In a few days we shall be at the mouth of the Scheldt, and at Ostend—in front of Dover. Besides, our grand fleet of Zeppelins are ready in their secret sheds. Later, when Belgium is devastated, they will glide forth for the conquest of our dear, sleepy friends, the British—whom God preserve. Meanwhile, we have a very satisfactory army of secret agents over yonder making ready to undermine any poor, puny defence that they—with all their vaunted might of Empire—can possibly put up.”

Both men laughed heartily as they stood there together, conversing in low tones.

“The intention, then, is first to destroy Belgium?” asked Rigaux, suddenly growing serious.

“Yes. To seize this country, notwithstanding any defence which may be offered. The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg we shall only march through. But the General Staff know that, in Belgium, there may be a desperate resistance, if Britain—the broken reed—is to be relied upon. Hence we shall smash her—and Britain afterwards.”

“But is Great Britain, with her splendid navy, really a broken reed?” queried the financier very seriously.

“Personally, I do not at all agree. I only tell you the declaration of our General Staff.”

“Britain has a very mysterious way of asserting her own superiority,” said the banker, shaking his head dubiously. “France is still, as she has ever been, a nation of great emotions. But Great Britain, with her enormous Colonial possessions, her deep-seated loyalty, and her huge wealth, is a tremendous

power—a power which I believe the Kaiser has never yet estimated at its true value.”

“Bah ! my dear Arnaud. We, in Berlin, know all that is in progress. Surely you must know, you must feel, the irresistible power of our militarism—of our great and formidable war-machine. Germany is the greatest nation at war that the world has ever seen, and——”

“And England still rules the seas,” interrupted the financier in a hard voice.

“The seas ! Bah !” declared his dusty, travel-worn visitor. “We shall first win on land ; then our grand fleet will face those overbearing British. We shall, like the Dutch, place a broom upon the mast-head of the flag-ship of Grand Admiral von Tirpitz, and sweep the British clean off the seas.”

“You are optimistical—to say the least.”

“I am, my dear Arnaud,” he admitted, “because I, as one of the General Staff, know what has been arranged, and what is intended. I know the great surprises we have in store for Europe—those great guns, which will smash and pulverise to dust the strongest fortresses which man can devise, and aircraft which will hurl down five tons of high explosive at a time,” he added, with an exultant laugh. “But, I had almost forgotten. Have you had any report from our friend Van Meenen, in Ostend ?”

“It came yesterday, and is included in the papers you have there. Our friends in Liège have been warned, I suppose ?”

“They have been warned to-day. Doctor Wilberz, brave Belgian, of course, has a secret wireless in his house, while sixty of our trusty agents are living there, quite unsuspected.”

"Wilberz was here in Brussels a month ago, and told me what he was doing. Truly the ring of forts will stand a very poor chance when you make the attack."

"Belgium will never dare to resist, we feel sure," declared Captain von Silberfeld. "In a month the Crown Prince will enter Paris. But I must get away at once. I have to be back in Cologne with the dawn. The Staff are awaiting your reports with eagerness, especially those upon the financial position."

"I have supplied every detail," responded the banker. "The position is not good, and even my friend the Baron de Neuville cannot, I happen to know, come to the rescue at the present moment."

"Good," exclaimed the Captam, dropping into German. "Adieu!" he said, placing the bulky envelope beneath his cotton dust-coat. "What excitement there is in the streets—eh?"

The banker laughed grimly.

"It will increase very soon, I suppose," he said.

"Yes," whispered the other, as they descended to the front entrance together, where the long, powerful, low-built car stood with its glaring head-lights, in charge of a smart chauffeur, who saluted in military fashion. "Adieu, my dear Arnaud. I must hasten," he whispered, "for to-morrow's dawn will bring to us 'The Day'!"

And with a triumphant wave of his hand he mounted beside the driver, and a moment later the car moved swiftly and silently down the hill on its long journey to the German frontier, carrying with it the final secret report of the many made through the last ten years by the traitor Arnaud Rigaux to the Prussian General Staff.

The man who had sold his country for German gold stood for a few seconds watching the car disappear into the night, and then, as the roar of the crowd making a demonstration before the French Consulate farther up the Boulevard fell upon his ears, he turned, and with a bitter laugh of triumph, went within and closed the great oaken door.

A silence fell. No one was near. Suddenly, a few moments later, the dark figure of a man, who had evidently been watching the departure of the car, as he stood back in the deep shadow of the trees in the centre of the boulevard, emerged, crossed the road, and hurried down the hill in the direction the car had taken.

CHAPTER V

BURSTING OF THE STORM

A GREAT, long, old-fashioned room with a rather low ceiling, across which ran black oaken-beams, around were lancet windows, high and narrow, with ancient leaded panes and green glass, the walls panelled with rare but faded tapestries, the carpet dull and also faded, and the heavy furniture genuinely Flemish of the sixteenth century.

On a long, padded seat in the recess of the central window, the depth of which showed the great strength of the walls, Aimée de Neuville sat, her white pointed chin resting upon her hand, gazing away over a marvellous panorama of winding river and wooded slopes, the deep beautiful valley of the Meuse, which lay far below that high-up château, once the fortress of the robber-knights of Hauteroche.

The splendid old Château de Sévérac, standing as it did half-way between quaint old-world Dinant, the resort of British tourists, and the French frontier at Givet, commanded a wide sweep of the beautiful valley with the blue, misty high-lands towards Luxembourg. The great place with its ponderous three-foot-thick walls, its round towers with slated roofs, and its deep, cavernous dungeons with inscribed stones, dated from the twelfth century, a fine feudal castle, which had played a leading part in the history of the Meuse valley—indeed, in the history of Europe. Built high upon its steep limestone cliff, around which the river swept suddenly in a semicircle, it had, in the days of its builders, been a fortress impregnable. Its private chapel bore the arms of the Knights-Templars, and in that very room, where the pale-faced young girl sat, the Emperor Charles V had sat, after the capture of Metz in 1552. A place full of historic memories, for the very walls spoke mutely of those turbulent times, when that valley was the chief theatre of all the fierce wars in Western Europe.

But the Knights of Hauteroche had defended it always from the attack of their bitterest foes, until, in 1772, it had passed from their hands, and having fallen to ruin, had, in the last days of the nineteenth century, been acquired by the rich Baron de Neuville, who was reputed to have spent half a million sterling upon its restoration, and a similar sum in furnishing it just as it had been in the sixteenth century.

Few such splendid strongholds existed in Europe. For years the Baron's agents had travelled up and down the Continent with open commissions to purchase antique furniture, tapestry, and armour of the

period, with the result that the castle was now unique. Inside its courtyard one was at once back in the days of the Emperor Charles V, the illusion being complete, even to the great kitchen of the robber-knights, where, upon the huge spit, an ox could be turned and roasted whole, so that the retainers—the bowmen of the forest—could be regaled and rewarded after their doughty exploits

From every corner of the world, tourists—many of them loud-speaking Americans with their red-bound Baedekers—craved of the Baron's major-domo, a vinegar-faced Frenchman, permission to pass through the splendid apartments, and when "the family" were not in residence, permission was generally accorded, for—as with all financiers, from Twickenham to Timbuctoo—the Baron, in secret, liked to be talked about. Indeed, the late King Leopold, who had on several occasions stretched his long legs in that room wherein Aimée now sat, had declared that the view from the window up the river to be one of the finest in all Europe.

Looking up the peaceful valley, where the Meuse wound far below in the August sunshine, there lay on the right bank grey rugged rocks descending sheer into the water green and deep, making a sudden bend ; while on the left lay green pastures and spreading woodlands, with range upon range of hills away to the blue haze of the frontier of France. Beside the river, the road followed like a white ribbon along its bank, and upon it the dusty old post-diligence, with its four weedy horses and its jingling bells, was travelling, just as it had travelled for two centuries past. Truly that reach of the Meuse was the most rural, peaceful, and picturesque spot in all the Ardennes, and little

wonder was it, indeed, that the Baron de Neuville, when the great ruined castle had been offered for sale, had immediately purchased it, and renovated it to its present perfect state.

"I can't think why father should have made us come here just in these troublous times," the girl exclaimed petulantly to her mother, a grave, white-haired, well-preserved lady in black, who, seated at the farther end of the room, was busy with her fancy needlework. And then the girl beat an impatient tattoo upon one of the small leaded window-panes with the tips of her slim white fingers.

"Your father thinks it is more pleasant for us here than in Brussels just now, with all the silly excitement in progress, my dear," the Baroness replied. "I have just had a telegram. He will be here to-night."

"Does he give any further news of the situation?"

"None."

"But when we left in the car yesterday, it was believed that we might be at war at any moment," the girl said.

Her mother, a calm-faced, rather stout woman, and typically Belgian, sighed deeply.

"What will happen we cannot tell, my girl."

"But if the Germans come, what shall we do?" queried Aimée, for she was thinking of Edmond, from whom she had had a hastily scribbled letter that morning. He had rejoined his regiment as *sous-officier*, and he said they expected to leave that day for the frontier.

"Do?" echoed the Baroness. "Why, nothing. They will simply march along the valley down yonder, and we shall be quite safe up here. The

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Germans are, after all, men of culture. They are gentlemen."

As she spoke, Mélanie, Aimée's French maid, entered the room, saying :

"A gentleman wishes to speak to M'sieur le Baron on the telephone. Will you speak, Mademoiselle ?" she asked.

"Who is he ?"

"The name he gave was Huart, Mademoiselle"

"Huart," exclaimed the Baroness. "That is surely the name of the manager of the Sirault Ironworks at Liège. Go and speak to him, Aimée."

The girl descended to her father's small business-room situated in the base of one of the round-slated turrets of the castle, and took up the telephone-receiver from the table.

"Hello ?" she asked.

"Is the Baron there ?" demanded a man's rough voice.

"No, m'sieur. But I am Mademoiselle de Neuville. Can I give him any message ? He is in Brussels, and will, I think, be here this evening."

"I am Huart, speaking from the works at Liège. War has broken out."

"War !" gasped the girl, holding her breath.

"Yes. Eighty thousand Germans are advancing towards the river, and we are already defending Liège against them. Terrible fighting is taking place. Hark ! Listen to our forts ! Can you hear ?"

The girl listened, and for the first time heard the thunder of war—a dull, low roar in the receiver.

"That was one of the big guns in Fort Loncin. General Leman is defending the city, but the Germans are burning all the villages around. From my

window here I can see the smoke across the river."

"Ah! this is awful!" the girl cried. "I will telephone to my father and tell him—if I can find him."

"Yes, Mademoiselle—tell him that I fear the worst. The first reports of the enemy reached here at dawn, and Liège seems to swarm with German spies. A dozen or so were caught signalling to the enemy with flags from the tops of high houses. They have all been shot—outside here, against the wall."

"They were not Belgians."

"They posed as such. One of them was one of my foremen. I always believed him to be a Belgian. It is a revelation, Mademoiselle."

"But can the Germans enter the city?"

"No, Mademoiselle. Last night all the bridges over the river were destroyed."

And then, even as she listened, a dull roar fell upon her ear. It was Fort Loncin speaking again with its steel throat.

"Please tell the Baron that I shall remain here pending further instructions from the company. We shall hold out here. Soldiers are pouring into the town. The first regiment of the Guides, and the second, fourth, and eighth Chasseurs-à-pied passed here early this morning, having come poste-haste from Brussels. They have gone along the river-bank. Liège will not suffer much, but the country around is already in flames. It is terrible, Mademoiselle—*terrible!*"

The eighth regiment of Chasseurs-à-pied! Then Edmond Valentin was already at the front! He was with them, along the river-bank!

"But are they killing people?" asked the girl, in frantic excitement.

"I fear they are, Mademoiselle," replied the voice, dying away slowly, and being succeeded by a loud electrical buzzing. "Reports have just come in that at Visé and Argenteau some townspeople fired at the soldiers, and in consequence the Germans are killing them, and burning down the houses. It is awful."

"But that can't really be true," she cried. "The Germans are surely not savages like that!"

"I fear that the reports are only too true, Mademoiselle. One came over the telephone from the Burgomaster of Cheratte, close to Argenteau. As an eye-witness of fearful atrocities, he reported them to the Préfect, with a request that they be immediately transmitted to the Minister of Justice, in Brussels."

"But it seems utterly incredible," the girl declared.

"As incredible as the swarms of spies here in the town. To-day, one does not know enemy from friend! But please tell your father that I will speak to him this evening—if the wires are not cut. They are already cut to Maastricht, Verviers, and Aix."

"Yes, do ring us up, m'sieur, and tell us what is happening," implored the girl. "Tell me what the Eighth Chasseurs are doing, and where they are. Will you, please? I have a friend in them—an officer."

"Certainly, Mademoiselle. I will do what I can, and—*Mon Dieu!*——"

The voice broke off short.

"M'sieur! M'sieur Huart! Hello!—hello!" cried the girl in wonder and apprehension.

There was no response, only a slight buzz. She

replaced the receiver upon the instrument, and turned the handle quickly. Then she listened again. All was silence.

"Hello! hello!" she called. "Hello, Liège! Hello, Liège!"

The wire was dead—cut, perhaps by a German shell!

Again and yet again she tried to obtain response to her call.

Their nearest exchange was that at Dinant.

"Hello, Dinant! *Dinant!*" she kept repeating. "*Hello, Dinant!*"

But from Dinant there was no reply.

Upon her the blow had fallen. Edmond, so manly and brave, was already at the front—one of the first to go forth against the giant invader of their gallant little nation. Those words from her father's employé in Liège had conveyed volumes to her.

War was no longer an eventuality. It was a fact. Already the Kaiser was hurling his legions of *Pikeldauben* westwards towards the sea. The Teutons had burst their bonds, and Edmond's prophecy had, alas! proved only to be true. The ambitious Kaiser meant war—war at all hazards and at all costs, in order to retain his imperial crown, and in order to justify, with his clamorous people, his title of the great War Lord of the twentieth century and ruler of the world.

But there had been many War Lords in the world ages before him—Rameses, Herod, Cæsar, Attila, and Napoleon. After all, the Kaiser, surrounded by his disgracefully degenerate *camarilla*, was but a pinchbeck edition of Bonaparte; a monarch who, while holding the outstretched hand of friendship to

Great Britain, had been hourly plotting to conquer her. The quintessence of treachery, the zenith of personal egotism existed, with the wildest dreams of avarice, in the heart of that deformed monarch, who was as warped in his brain as in his body. In his gaudy tinsel, and in all his panoply of uniform, and his tin crosses which he believed to be iron, he was but the pliable puppet of the degenerates of Potsdam. He believed himself to be the Sword of God—as he had insanely declared to his troops—and stood as the idol of the people of “kultur” yet tottering upon his pedestal.

His fierce antagonism towards civilisation, as opposed to the Prussian militarism, had been betrayed by his undying words, which would live in history through the ages. The fierce War Lord, in his pitiable arrogance, had actually incited his troops to murder and debauchery by the words he had spoken—words that would be for ever registered against him upon his downfall.

“When you meet the foe you will defeat him,” he had said. “No quarter will be given, no prisoners will be taken. Let all who fall into your hands be at your mercy. Gain a reputation like the Huns under Attila.” That reputation was, apparently, what his hordes were achieving in the burning of Visé and Argenteau. Attila, in his expedition across Greece, reduced seventy of the finest cities to smoking ruins and shambles. He was the black demon of ruin and destruction, and this modern murder-Monarch of the Huns, if that report over the telephone be true, was emulating the blood-guilty ruffian.

Pale and breathless, Aimée de Neuville rushed up

the great staircase to relate, to her mother the appalling news that Germany had, at last, swept down upon peaceful little Belgium with fire and sword.

The war-cloud had burst! The Kaiser, in his eagerness to plunge Europe into blood, had not waited for Great Britain's reply. His lustful, grey-coated hordes of braided Uhlans, infantry and artillery, with all their endless streams of lumbering guns, heavy waggons, motor-cars, and loaded motor-lorries, had crossed the frontier, and with the fierceness of hell-hounds let loose, were already sweeping the valley of that peaceful-flowing river which wound below the great Château de Sévérac.

War! War! WAR!

The girl, pale and excited, held her breath as she placed her thin, trembling fingers upon the handle of the door of that room wherein her mother sat in calm ignorance of the awful truth.

War! War! WAR!

And Edmond, the man whom she loved, the man whose last final kiss she still felt upon her brow, had marched into Liége with his regiment, to face the treacherous Germans, to fight for home and freedom, and to stem the great oncoming Teuton tide.

Should she tell the Baroness the truth?

For a second the girl, pale with agitation, hesitated. The awfulness of such sudden news might unnerve her. She had a weak heart.

No. She would conceal her knowledge of the awful fact.

She drew a deep breath and, opening the door, entered smiling, as she exclaimed with a wonderfully careless and nonchalant air:

"Oh! the man only wants to talk to father on business. I told him he would be here to-night to dinner."

CHAPTER VI

IN THE TRENCHES BEFORE LIÉGE

AT that same moment when Aimée had listened to the dread news over the telephone, Edmond Valentin, in the uniform of a *sous-officier* of Chasseurs-à-pied, in his heavy dark-green overcoat and peaked shako, with his bulging haversack upon his back, was kneeling in a hastily dug trench firing steadily across the broad sunlit river, which lay deep in its valley.

On the opposite bank ran the railway from Liège, across the Dutch frontier to Maastricht, and from beyond the line there appeared all along, for miles, light puffs of smoke which betrayed the position of the enemy, who had crossed those picturesque green hills of the frontier, and who were endeavouring to force a passage across the Meuse.

On the right, over the hills where the river wound, could be heard the loud roar of the German guns which had been brought up against Liège, while from the left came the eternal rattle of the machine-guns. In that trench, before which the river and the canal ran parallel, the men on either side of Edmond uttered no word. They were silent, firing with regularity, fascinated by the novel scene. Most of them had played the war-game at the annual manoeuvres, when one stood up in trenches and laughed in the face of blank cartridge. Yet here was real war. Already

more than one of their comrades had fallen on their faces struck by German bullets, and not far away a shell had just burst behind one of their machine-guns.

The din and rattle of it all struck a strange, uncanny note upon that quiet countryside.

For nearly half an hour Edmond had been plugging away with his men, when of a sudden a machine-gun section ran up close to them. Room was made in the trench, and the gun, carried in parts by half a dozen sturdy soldiers, was quickly assembled.

Then, the belt of cartridges having been adjusted, at the word of command the terrible engine of destruction suddenly spat its hail of death across the river.

The *onderofficier* with the gun laughed gaily to Edmond, saying in Flemish .

"Our friends yonder will not like this—eh?"

"*Gy hebt gelyk*" (you are right), laughed Edmond. "But see over there! What is that smoke; there—away to the left?"

"That is Visé," was the reply, shouted above the rattle of the machine-gun. "The enemy must have set the place on fire—the brutes! Look!"

And as both watched they saw a great column of black smoke rising slowly into the clear, cloudless sky.

"If they cross at the bridge there they will have the road open to them to Tongres and St. Trond—the main road to Brussels. I suppose we are defending it," said the *onderofficier*, a man with a red moustache.

"Ja! Let's hope so," said Edmond, raising his Mauser rifle mechanically again, and discharging the five cartridges from its magazine.

At that instant the trench was suddenly swept by

a perfect hail of lead from across the river, while from over the heights beyond came a Taube aeroplane, which noisily buzzed as it rose higher and higher, and then, out of range, made a complete circle, in order to reconnoitre the defenders' position. Dozens of men in the trenches raised their rifles and fired at it. But it had already risen high out of harm's way, and gaily it circled round and round over the line of the Meuse, noting all the Belgian positions on the north bank of the river, and signalling to the enemy from time to time.

The spot where Edmond was stationed with his regiment was situated about eight miles from Liège, and one from Visé. Just to his right was a bridge, which the Belgians had not destroyed, and which the enemy were now protecting from destruction by means peculiar to the "blonde beasts" of the Kaiser.

Placed upon it were two big furniture-vans, which had been hastily daubed in the Belgian colours—red, black, and yellow. And these were filled with Belgian soldiers, prisoners in German hands. By adopting these dastardly methods, they knew that the defenders would not shell the bridge and destroy it.

Edmond's regiment did not present any picture of uniformity. Some men about him were dressed in the military fashion of thirty years ago—caps with enormous peaks, and wide-flowing capes covering green and yellow uniforms—while others, including himself, were in the dark-green modern uniform which has lately been adopted, and had been served out to those who had hurriedly rejoined the colours. While the enemy were all in the new service kit of greenish-grey cloth, which at a distance was exceedingly difficult to distinguish—with heavy leather boots

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reaching half-way up their calves—the Belgians marched in garments of all colours, from the sombre black of the carabineers to the bright amaranthe and green of the Guides.

In war some curious sights are seen in the trenches. Close to where Valentin was crouching there knelt a smart lancer, with a basket containing carrier-pigeons strapped to his back like a knapsack. Amid the roar and din the poor birds fluttered about restlessly inside their cage, eager to escape to their homes. But if the brave little Belgian nation lacked uniforms and accoutrements, it never lacked courage. All was a hubbub of hope, and a talk of victory.

"*A bas les Alboches !*" "*Vive la guerre !*" had been shouted from Ostend to Givet, and the spirits of the nation—soldiers and civilians alike—were of the highest, for now that England had declared war, Belgium was fighting the battles of two great nations, France and Britain.

Both French and British soldiers would soon come to their aid, if they could only hold out.

"They will never silence our forts at Liège," declared the lancer with the pigeons. But just as he uttered the words, Edmond Valentin heard a sound like the shrill yell of a small dog in the distance, and the next second there occurred near them a terrific explosion.

The deadly German artillery were getting the range !

Again and again came the familiar yell, followed by the inevitable crash. A dozen or so men were lying about him, shattered, dead, or dying.

But the pom-pom continued to deal death, slackening only now and then when a fresh belt was adjusted.

Adding to the roar of heavy guns, and quite close to them, lay the hidden fort of Pontisse, while forts Barchon, Evegnée, and Fleron, on the heights across the river, were thundering and dealing death in the enemy's ranks. Behind them, to the left, lay three other forts—Liers, Lanlin, and Loncin—defending the city of Liège, and forming a further portion of the ring.

Time after time their huge guns roared, and the very earth quaked. Time after time the enemy across the river were decimated by the terrible fire.

Then, every now and then, the ear was deafened by the loud crackling of musketry, which sounded like the loading of granite blocks into a cart. They were of two pitches, the deeper from the rifles of the infantry, and the sharper from the cavalry carbines. And above it all—above the constant explosions of shrapnel—sounded the regular pom-pom-pom-pom, steady as the tick of a rapid clockwork motor—adding to the deadly fire now sweeping the valley for nearly twenty miles.

Edmond, quite cool and determined, lay there firing away in the direction of the little puffs of grey smoke, which were hardly distinguishable behind the distant railway line. It was his first experience of being under fire, and after the first few minutes he grew quite unconcerned, even though he saw that many of his comrades had, alas! been bowled over. The primeval fury of the male beast bent on fighting, which seizes every man who is called upon to defend his life, had also seized him.

"They say that the French will be at Liège to-night," remarked the *onderofficier* with the red

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moustache, in charge of the machine-gun. "If they are, we will teach those German brutes a lesson. We will——"

Next instant he reeled and fell forward upon his face. A bullet entering his jaw had passed through his head, carrying with it a large piece of his skull. Death had been instantaneous. With hope of victory upon his lips the brave fellow had passed, in a single second, into that land which lies beyond the human ken.

The four Chasseurs serving the gun stopped and turned him over, but saw at once that he no longer lived.

A few seconds later Edmond heard sharp words of command from his lieutenant, who had crawled along to him, and in obedience he ceased firing his Mauser, took the dead man's place and assumed charge of the machine-gun, which, within another half-minute, was continuing its work, while the body of the *onder-officier* was dragged aside.

"Curse the grey devils! They shall pay for that!" cried one of the men fiercely.

Just then, however, there came a lull in the firing. The shells had ceased, and the enemy was slackening in his attack all along the line.

Was the fight subsiding?

A dull, distant roar was heard from Boncelles, where the steel cupolas were rising, and the big guns hurling death at the grey hordes of the Kaiser, and then disappearing. Then silence.

Suddenly another loud crackling of rifles, and again Edmond's pom-pom recommenced its rapid rhythmic rattle.

More Mausers crackling, the shrill yell of a shell

passing over them, and then a blood-red explosion some distance behind them.

Another shouted word of command, and the whole line of rifles were again discharged. It seemed almost as a signal for the fight to recommence, for next moment the attack was renewed with redoubled vigour.

The short, sharp reports of the enemy's artillery reverberated along the valley, and shells were now exploding unpleasantly near the trenches.

"I thought they had had enough," growled one of the men to Edmond, in French, "but it seems they haven't. *Bien*, we will show the Kaiser and his brigands that we mean defiance. See, over there, m'sieur! They are burning Visé, and Argenteau too! I lived in Visé when a boy. My sister is there now—unless she has escaped into Holland. I pray to God the poor girl has done so."

"I sincerely hope she has," Edmond declared. "It surely is no place for a woman down yonder."

"*Ah, mon vieux*, they've been killing women and children, the savages," growled another man with set teeth, as he took out a fresh belt of cartridges. "I heard so as we came along from Liége. But I can't believe it to be true. The Germans are surely not savages, but a cultured race."

"Culture!" snapped the first man, a somewhat rough, uncouth fellow, plainly of the peasant class. "If they were cultured, as it is said, they would not burn those undefended villages yonder, and massacre the inhabitants as they are doing. It is horrible—awful!"

"Ah, but the massacres are only hearsay," Edmond remarked.

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"No. One man, an eye-witness, has escaped from Visé. He swam the river, told the terrible truth, and the report was telephoned this morning to Brussels. I overheard our captain tell the major as we were on the march here. The Germans have shot down dozens of men and women, and even little children. Some of them have been deliberately burned alive in their homes. That, m'sieur, is the way Germany makes war! But surely that is not war—it is savage butchery, m'sieur. Culture, bah!"

And the man bent again to his gun.

Could those brave Belgians have seen what was, at that moment, happening in those unoffending villages about them, they would surely have left their trenches and, even regardless of the pitiless fire of the enemy, dashed to the rescue of the poor unoffending inhabitants. On that warm, bright sunlit August day, whole villages were being put to the sword by the ruthless soldiery of the Kaiser, upon the flimsy pretext that the villagers, being non-combatants, had fired upon the troops. Yet the truth came out that such massacres of the inhabitants were actually part of the general plan of campaign. The Kaiser had ordered those cold-blooded atrocities for purely strategical considerations. They were not merely the riotous and isolated outbursts of marauding and buccaneering soldiers, but were ordered by Imperial command.

Over there, among those green hillsides sloping to the river, the Teutonic wave had burst its bounds. Fiendish tortures were being inflicted on helpless old men, women, and children. Peaceful villagers were hanged to trees, sometimes stark naked, and their bodies riddled by bullets. Innocent children were savagely sabred by German officers who, only a week

before, were strutting in civilised drawing-rooms, the scented and elegant darlings of the ladies of Berlin.

At that hour, while Edmond Valentin crouched beside his newly acquired pom-pom, pouring a deadly fire away across the river, there were being enacted scenes of outrage, plunder, and massacre too terrible even to bear description—scenes in which blood-guilty ruffians of the great War Lord of Germany performed their grim and terrible work, a work so dastardly and inhuman as to have no parallel; atrocious acts actually ordered by the officers themselves, and which would for ever be handed down in history as an indelible blot upon the escutcheon of those blasphemous and barbarous brigands who loved to call their country the Fatherland.

That strip of green, smiling, undulating country between the German frontier and the Meuse, dotted by small prosperous villages, many of them filled by factory-hands and work-people, was that day swept by the fierce fiery hurricane of war, and so suddenly had it all come upon them that most of the people had not had time to realise what war meant ere they found the swaggering Uhlans clattering up the streets, shouting at and insulting the inhabitants, shooting down men, women, and children, and laughing heartily at the panic which their appearance caused.

From where Edmond Valentin was posted he could only see the columns of black smoke as it rose steadily from the farms and villages now burning in all directions. He, like nearly everyone else, disbelieved the stories of murder and mutilation, for they were really incredible. Surely the Kaiser would never treat

little Belgium in such a manner after his Empire solemnly guaranteeing its neutrality !

If so, of what use were treaties ? Why should anybody's signature be honoured further, either in business or in social life ?

Bang ! There was a blood-red flash, the air was filled with blue-grey smoke and a poisonous odour which made one's eyes smart. For a second, Edmond was staggered by the terrible force of the concussion, for he had been dealt a blow from behind which sent him reeling forward heavily. The air was filled with flying fragments, and he held his breath. It was as though an earthquake had occurred.

Then, when the smoke cleared, he saw a dozen of his comrades lying shattered about him, including two of the men at his gun. Not far away the scorched grass had been torn up, and a great hole showed in the brown earth.

He set his teeth, and bent over the two fallen men. One had been wounded in the stomach by a fragment of the shell, and was writhing on the ground in his death agony, uttering fearful curses upon the enemy and the Kaiser in particular ; while the other, after a final convulsive shudder which shook his whole frame and told its own tale to anybody who had been under fire in battle, turned slowly over and then lay quite still.

The shell alas ! had only been too truly placed, for not only were a dozen brave fellows lying shattered, but a splinter had also struck the breech of Edmond's gun, and it had jammed in consequence.

When serving before with the Chasseurs he had been in charge of a machine-gun, and hence was thoroughly

familiar with its mechanism. Therefore, quite calmly, as though no fight were in progress, he quickly unscrewed the parts, discovered that a pin was bent and knocked it straight, and within five minutes the pom-pom was again pouring forth, its ram of lead sweeping to and fro across the railway line opposite.

Suddenly, with a roar and flash, another earthquake occurred. The air instantly became filled with black acrid smoke and flying fragments of shell from one of the enemy's howitzers beyond the hills, and at that moment the trench became a perfect inferno, for deadly shells were falling upon it, and dozens of Edmond's comrades were being maimed or killed on every hand.

As the smoke cleared slightly he bent again to sight the gun, when his eye caught the bridge below, whereon the dastardly enemy had placed that van-load of brave Belgians as a parti-coloured screen.

Just as he looked, he saw a shell, fired deliberately by a German gunner, strike the van, explode, and next second there remained only a heap of wreckage, among which the twenty poor fellows who had been imprisoned in it were lying heaped, dead and dying, some of them shattered out of all recognition.

"The murderers!" cried Edmond, while his men, who also noticed what had happened, loudly cursed the ruthless barbarians with whom they now found themselves confronted

Bang! The explosion was deafening. Edmond again felt the concussion where he was crouching. It knocked his shako aside, and for a second he believed he had been hit. Yet, by a miracle, he was unharmed.

Next second an order was shouted—the order to retire !

The Germans, now using their artillery and shelling the Belgian trenches, were advancing. They were crossing the bridge below, and a pontoon section had already begun its work under fire.

Bang ! Bang ! Bang !

Shells were falling thickly now. Their defence had, alas ! been all in vain. Edmond heard the order shouted in Flemish

“ *Vlucht ! Vlucht !* ” shouted the lieutenant. Edmond stood for a second like a man in a dream. The earth everywhere was being whipped by bullets.

Then he directed his men to dismantle the gun and, two others helping, each quickly shouldering a piece, the little party made off with the Chasseurs over the crest of the hill and down the other side, leaving behind them, alas ! many hundreds of their poor comrades.

Bang ! Yet another shell fell, rending a great hole in the trench at the very spot where, only a few moments before, Edmond Valentin's gun had been standing.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE EAGLE'S CLAWS

Two days later the Sixth Brigade, to which the Eighth Chasseurs belonged, had been christened by the men “The Flying Column,” for it had been designed to support the other brigades in action. Since their retreat from the Meuse, Edmond Valentin had marched with his regiment hither and thither ;

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marched until he was footsore, with few intervals of rest, sometimes engaging the enemy, and then moving forward again to some new position, blindly, but with the knowledge that it was upon some general, previously conceived plan.

War is truly a strange experience. The mere man in the fighting-line shoots in a trench, lies low, smokes a cigarette and chaffs his comrades, shoots again, then advances—or retreats, as the case may be. Rumours pass from mouth to mouth of success or of defeat; he knows not which is the truth. Retire or advance, what does it matter? If one retires it is for strategic purposes; if one advances it does not mean victory. Edmond Valentin, *sous-officier* of infantry, was but a mere little pawn in that colossal game of world-power.

They had made a great detour around Liège, behind the forts of Lanlin, Loncin, and Flémalle, and as the fighting had now become intense near Fort Boncelles, they had been called up to assist the attacked brigade.

It was night when they reached the little village of Esneux, prettily situated on the river. On the previous day the place had been occupied by the Germans under Von Emmich, but the big guns from Boncelles had been turned upon them, and the Bavarians had been compelled to evacuate the place, not, however, before they had driven out the poor frightened inhabitants and sacked it. But the heavy shell-fire from the Boncelles fort had wrecked the town and set fire to it, so that when the Chasseurs arrived they found it only a heap of still smoking ruins.

About nine o'clock that evening Edmond's company

took up a position in a dark wood close to an old ruined château above the burnt-out village, but presently, with about thirty others, he was ordered out to the edge of the wood where the highroad ran to Liége. Once there, every one of them was left to his own thoughts, and Edmond, having fixed his gun in position in a ditch well covered behind a wall, sat back with his men, lit a cigarette and reflected.

He was thinking of Aimée, as he thought of her always every hour, wondering whether she had fled from Belgium, now that invasion was an accomplished fact. That day the wildest rumours had reached them—rumours of German successes everywhere, save at Liége. It was declared, from mouth to mouth, that the French had been driven back all along the line, and that the enemy were already marching through Holland on to Antwerp—German-made lies which were, later on, proved to have been circulated to create panic.

As they waited there, gazing anxiously across the river where blood-red glares showed away in the distance—farms and homesteads fired deliberately by the Uhlans—the moon rose brightly in the clear sky. Now and then could be heard the distant rumble of heavy artillery, while at infrequent intervals the forts of Embourg across the river and Boncelles on their left roared forth, showing sharp, angry flashes in the night.

Close by where Edmond had taken up his position was a small stone-built hut, roofless and in ruins; but upon its walls he noticed that a big white paper had been pasted.

He strode up to it, and in the moonlight examined it. The poster was one of the enemy's proclamations

which had been printed in Berlin in readiness months before, and he read as follows :

AU PEUPLE BELGE !

C'est à mon plus grand regret que les troupes Allemandes se voient forcées de franchir la frontière de la Belgique. Elles agissent sous la contrainte d'une nécessité inévitable la neutralité de la Belgique ayant été déjà violée par des officiers français qui, sous un déguisement, aient traversé le territoire belge en automobile pour pénétrer en Allemagne

Belges ! C'est notre plus grand désir qu'il y ait encore moyen d'éviter un combat entre deux peuples qui étaient amis jusqu'à présent, jadis même alliés. Souvenez vous du glorieux jour de Waterloo où c'étaient les armes allemandes qui ont contribué à fonder et établir l'indépendance et la prospérité de votre patrie.

Mais il nous faut le chemin libre. Des destructions de ponts, de tunnels, de voies ferrées devront être regardées comme des actions hostiles. Belges, vous avez à choisir.

J'espère donc que l'Armée allemande de la Meuse ne sera pas contrainte de vous combattre. Un chemin libre pour attaquer celui qui voulait nous attaquer, c'est tout ce que nous désirons.

Je donne des garanties formelles à la population belge qu'elle n'aura rien à souffrir des horreurs de la guerre ; que nous payerons en monnayé les vivres qu'il faudra prendre du pays ; que nos soldats se montreront les meilleurs amis d'un peuple pour lequel nous éprouvons la plus haute estime, la plus grande sympathie.

C'est de votre sagesse et d'un patriotisme bien compris qu'il dépend d'éviter à votre pays les horreurs de la guerre.

Le Général Commandant en Chef l'Armée de la Meuse,

VON EMMICH.

It was a proclamation which was now posted everywhere, not only in the districts occupied by the Germans, but it had also been secretly affixed to walls by spies in Liège, Louvain, Charleroi, and even in Brussels itself. By it, the Germans were hoping to secure the allegiance of the Belgian people.

While this proclamation expressed regret that the German troops found themselves obliged to cross the Belgian frontier, it pointed out that only necessity compelled them to do so because French officers had violated Belgian territory by crossing from France into Germany by motor-cars. A poor excuse surely for the burning and sacking of all those little undefended frontier towns—Visé, Argenteau, Soumagne, Poulseur, and the rest.

"Belgians!" it went on "It is our great desire that there may still be means to avoid a combat between two peoples who were friends until now, and were formerly even allies. Remember the glorious day of Waterloo, where fought the German armies who contributed to found and establish the independence and prosperity of your country.

"But we must have an open road. Any destruction of bridges, tunnels, or railways must be regarded as hostile actions. Belgians, it is for you to choose!

"I hope, then, that the German army of the Meuse will not be compelled to wage war with you. An open way to attack those who wish to attack us. that is all we desire.

"I give these formal guarantees to the Belgian population that it will suffer nothing from the horrors of war, that we will pay in gold for the provisions that we find necessary to take from your country; that our soldiers will show themselves to be the best friends of a people for whom we cherish the highest esteem and the greatest sympathy.

"By your wisdom and patriotism, which we fully recognise, your country will be spared the horrors of war.

"General Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the Meuse,

"VON EMMICH."

And yet the poor inhabitants of Visé had been outraged and shot by the Kaiser's unrestrained savages ! In all those villages lying across the rippling Ourthe and the broad Meuse, the treatment of the inoffensive civilians had been ruthless and merciless. Removal from the face of the earth—a favourite phrase of the Germans themselves—was, from the first, the invader's idea of how best to deal with the unarmed, unoffending villagers, the only crime of whose hard-working people was that they had fallen in the path of the blasphemous Prussian militarism.

A private who was reading the proclamation remarked to Edmond :

"What trickery—eh ? I hear that the Uhlans yesterday shot the Burgomaster of Esneux, over yonder, and propped his body against a wall all day as a warning—because he had carried a revolver. Thirty men were afterwards shot in the Place without any trial whatever, and women and children were outraged and bayoneted and their bodies flung into the river. Our women, they say, are being treated infamously, and all the possessions of the villagers are being destroyed. May God curse those Germans !"

"Yes," replied the *sous-officier*, and as he turned away with a sigh a red light behind the hill gradually appeared, and then quickly grew brighter. "There is another village on fire, over there. I suppose the Uhlans will drive our people to reprisals so that excuse for further cruelty may be found."

"And yet they post up this proclamation !" cried the man in Flemish, and with the point of his bayonet he succeeded in tearing holes in the notice, and eventually mutilated and obliterated it, saying :

"Death to the Alboches ! Death to the Kaiser's

murderers and brigands ! After all, the Emperor who makes war upon women and children is only a brigand, just like those in Sicily. Surely a prize should be offered for his head ! ”

Just as the man spoke they both saw, in the distance, sudden little red flashes, which told that the troops were vomiting death upon the enemy again, so they dashed back to their ditch, while in the trees above them could already be heard the “ phit ” of the enemy’s bullets as they struck the branches.

Ere a few moments the order was given to fire, and quickly Edmond’s pom-pom again began its regular spitting of death, whilst on the flank their invisible batteries also opened fire with destructive shrapnel.

The night grew darker, and the moon became, for a time, obscured behind a bank of swiftly-drifting cloud. In the distance the fires lit up the battle scene with a red, sinister glare, while, far away upon the hills on the right, could be seen moving masses of Belgian soldiers, a Dantean vision of hell, and whilst the men lay in their shallow ditch firing away with monotonous regularity, bullets were whistling past, striking the trees, or flattening themselves with muffled noise in the earth.

The fight was a hot one. In front were the millions of the Kaiser, oncoming like a great irresistible tide, yet the gallant little Belgian army, which for years had been jeered at by every Frenchman, soldier or civilian, as a comic-opera force, were defending their country in a manner so patriotic and desperate that it held the whole world in surprise.

Confronted by a big and arrogant Empire, which for years had laid its cunningly-devised plots for their destruction, the Belgian army stood undaunted,

and meant to strive on and defend their soil until France and Great Britain could come to their aid.

That the Germans should never take Belgium had been resolved in the hearts of all King Albert's subjects, while His Majesty himself, in the uniform of a private of infantry, was daily in the trenches, and often spoke quiet, homely words of encouragement to private and general alike. The whole army knew how, two days before, he had been in the trenches at Herstal, and had given private soldiers cigarettes with his own hands. In some cases he had not, at first, been recognised, dressed in a shabby, dusty uniform, just like themselves.

But he was a king—a king eventually without a country—and his name will for ever go down in history as a wonderful example of self-denial, personal bravery, and of human sympathy with his crushed and desolated nation.

Suddenly, while Edmond was commanding his gun, a shrapnel burst just behind him. A bullet struck his water-bottle, and a splinter passing through it the water ran out down his leg. But at the same moment another bullet struck in the head a man to whom he was giving an order and he fell heavily forward on his face—dead.

In a moment the place seemed swept by lead. Two or three shells fell in quick succession, the enemy having apparently advanced to a long copse just across the river-bank.

"The brutes have occupied Esneux again, I believe," remarked a man close by.

Away on the crest of one of the hills a small but very bright light showed. It was flashing in Morse code. A signaller quite near read it aloud.

"The enemy!" he shouted. "The message is in German!"

Yet they still plugged away with their rifles, undaunted at the enemy's advance. The forts were speaking more frequently now, and continually the very earth trembled beneath the great crashes of modern artillery of the Braulmont system of defence.

Along that dark line of low hills was seen constant flashing in the blackness; storm clouds had arisen to obscure the moon, and rain was now threatening. The whole sky was now a deep, angry red, with patches of crimson heightening and dying down—the reflections of the inferno of war. The noise was deafening, and on every hand the gallant defenders were sustaining heavy losses.

Of a sudden, before indeed they were aware of it, the whole edge of the wood became lit up by an intense white brilliance, so dazzling that one could not discern anything in front. A thousand headlights of motor-cars seemed to be there focussed into one. The Germans had turned one of their great field searchlights upon them, and a second later shells fell and burst in all directions in the vicinity.

Handicapped by want of such modern appliances, the Belgians were unable to retaliate. They could only remain there, in the actual zone of the enemy's pitiless fire. Dozens of brave men fell shattered or dead amid that awful whirlwind of bullets and fragments of steel, as slowly the long ray of intense light moved along the line, searching for its prey, followed by the enemy's artillery which never failed to keep up a pitiless, relentless fire, with wonderful accuracy for a night engagement.

From end to end swept that white line of brilliancy ;

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then slowly—very slowly—it came back again, causing the men to lie flat upon their stomachs and wait in breathless anxiety until it had passed. Time after time that long, shallow trench which was, after all, only a ditch, for no opportunity had been afforded for military engineering—was swept by both light and fire from end to end, and each time Edmond's comrades were being placed *hors de combat*. That the situation was critical, he knew. Yet not a single man stood dismayed. Their Mausers crackled with just the same regularity, and, thanks to the fine spirit of his men, his pom-pom continued to rain lead upon the trenches of Von Emmich's walls of men across the river.

At last the "retire" was sounded. The position had by this time become quite untenable. Edmond Valentin bit his nether lip. The same order always. They retired, but never advanced. For them, the Teuton tide seemed utterly overwhelming. Yet their spirit was never broken. The Belgian is ever an optimist.

Surely Belgium would never fall beneath the Kaiser's rule, to be ground under his iron heel and smashed by that "mailed fist" which had so long been the favourite joke of the great caricaturists of Europe.

Impossible !

With alacrity the Maxim was dismounted, and with calm orderliness the retirement was commenced at a moment when that annoying searchlight had turned its attention to the right flank, and the great white beam lay full upon it.

They were to withdraw towards Liège, first retiring into the wood.

"*Wat zullen wy doen ?*" (what is to be done ?)

asked one of Edmond's men in Flemish—the thick-set man who had read the proclamation.

"Our general knows best, my comrade," Edmond reassured him in his own language. "This may be only a strategic move. We shall sweep them off our soil before long—depend upon it."

"*Gy hebt gelyk*" (You are right), muttered the man, panting beneath his load—the barrel of the Maxim strapped across his shoulder.

"*Ik stem geheel met U*" (I quite agree with you), murmured another of the men in his soft, musical Flemish. "We will never surrender to those brigands! Never, while there is breath left in us. They are assassins, not soldiers!"

They marched forward along the wide, dark, dusty road, safe from the enemy's fire at that point because of the rising ground between them and the winding, peaceful valley of the Ourthe.

In their faces stood Liège, five miles distant. They were moving forward, still in high spirits. Many of the men were whistling to themselves as they marched, sturdy and undaunted. The Eighth Chasseurs was one of the first regiments of King Albert, all men of splendid bravery, and of finer physique than the average Belgian.

From Liège came still the continuous boom of artillery, for the forts untaken were keeping up a regular fire, and the enemy, it was known, were sustaining terrible losses both night and day.

The forts, built in a ring in the environs of the city, were safe enough. But not so the town. The Germans, aided by their swarms of spies in the place, had made a dozen attempts to take it during the past forty-eight hours, but had always been repulsed.

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They had resorted to every ruse. One party of Germans had dressed themselves in British uniforms—whence they obtained them nobody has ever known—and on entering the town were at once welcomed enthusiastically as allies. But, fortunately, the ruse was discovered when one was overheard to speak in German, and all were promptly shot. Then another party appeared as Belgian Red Cross men, and they, on being discovered to be enemies, shared a similar fate—they were shot in the Place Cockerill. The Germans had requested an armistice for twenty-four hours to bury their dead. This, however, was refused, because it was well known that the big Krupp howitzers—"the German surprise to Europe"—were being brought up, each drawn by forty horses, and that the cessation of hostilities asked for was really craved in order to gain time to get these ponderous engines of destruction into position.

As they were marching, the moon again shone out over the doomed city of Liège, when of a sudden Edmond saw over it, in the sky, three black points which immediately changed into a light cloud, and soon flames were rising from the town. The Germans were now firing petrol-shells upon the place!

They gained a small village called Angleur, a quaint little whitewashed place, over which shot and shell had swept for the past three days, until the villagers now took no notice. Here generous hearts offered comfort to the tired soldiers, jugs of fresh milk and bread were brought out though it was the middle of the night.

But they had no time to accept those gifts.

Presently they met some terrified people—men, women, and children—fleeing from outside Liège,

carrying bundles, all they could save from their wrecked homes.

"The Germans are in the wood!" they cried,

Before them lay a blazing village

Edmond's captain gave an order to halt, and they drew up. Then they saw the disappearance into the red furnace of entire companies, and soon afterwards the stretchers and ambulance corps following each other in quick succession told them of the splendid heroism of their glorious defenders.

Again they went forward, every man's mouth hard-set and determined, yet in some cases with a grim joke upon their lips, for they resolved to defend the lives of their dearly-loved ones, and to account for as many of the enemy as they could.

"For God and Belgium!" shouted one man, a stout private from Malines, who had lost his shako and his kit.

Then they all ran to death with but little hope left in them. Such an illustration of bravery had been rare in this present century.

The remembrance of the Almighty, shouted by that fat private, had an effect upon the religious men in the ranks, officers and privates alike, and in that red glare of war, with blood showing in the very sky, they dashed on with renewed hope and a spirit of splendid patriotism unbroken.

They took cover in an orchard and, pulling down the hedges frantically, soon saw, descending from the hill on their right, the batteries and remains of their own much-tested regiments.

Stretchers were taken up to the woods on the left, and soon came down again with the wounded. Edmond's "Flying Column" was protecting the trans-

port of these "braves," but an order was shouted that they had to withdraw away up on to the plateaux. Then they rushed to the fort of Flémalle, where they took up fighting positions. But the Germans did not want to make another attempt. The mission of the Eighth Chasseurs was over. Three hours later they moved forward again. The forts would now defend their position in the campaigning army.

Such was a typical night of the defence of Liège.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DOUBLE FACE

AT the Château de Sévérac the hot, fevered days were passing but slowly.

Aimée and the Baroness were still there, and now they had been joined by the Baron, who had in Brussels been assured that the enemy would respect the houses of the rich, and that at his splendid home, perched high on that rock above the Meuse, they would have nothing to fear. Rigaux, indeed, had declared to his friend that at the château they would be far safer than in any of the towns, which might be invested or bombarded—safer even than in Brussels itself.

Hence they had remained there, full of hourly anxiety as to what really would be the outcome of it all.

The Baron de Neuville had suggested that his wife and Aimée should flee to England. But while Aimée felt that so long as she remained in Belgium she might at least have a chance of seeing Edmond very

soon, the Baroness, on her part, refused to leave her husband's side, while he, in his responsible position as financial adviser to the Government, could not leave Belgium.

From time to time they received scraps of terrifying news over the telephone from Brussels. Aimée, indeed, each hour rang up her father's secretary in Brussels, and listened to the latest news from the scene of the fighting.

But, alas! it was a tale of repeated disaster, until she became sick at heart. Of the whereabouts of the Eighth Chasseurs she could glean nothing. She had heard nothing whatsoever of them since they passed through Liège on their way to the front. For aught she knew, they might have shared the same fate as that of other regiments, or been swept out of existence by the terrible fire of the enemy's machine-guns.

Often she would step out upon the balcony which led from her own room and gave such a wonderful panorama of river and woods, and there she would listen attentively.

Sometimes she fancied she could hear the far-distant booming of the guns. And yet the world about her, warm and sunlit, without a cloud in the brilliant summer sky, seemed so very peaceful. The birds sang merrily, and the peasants, undisturbed after the first days of war, were now garnering in the yellow corn.

The first panic of war had passed, and the dull-eyed Walloons, who composed the major part of the population in that district, clattered along in their wooden sabots and declared that the enemy were going straight on towards Brussels. They would never come near them.

They were unaware as yet of the frightful deeds being done beyond Liége in those warm summer days, acts of merciless savagery and every refinement of cruelty which degenerate minds, filled with the blood-lust of war, could conceive. They knew not of the dastardly practice, made by the Kaiser's "cultured" troops, of placing before them innocent women and children to act as a living screen, in the hope that the Allies would not, from motives of humanity, fire upon them.

The whole world was being thrilled and shocked by the unspeakable acts of these blonde beasts who, at the behest of their arrogant Kaiser, had simply become hordes of savages, and whose atrocious acts could only be compared with those of the troops of African wilds. But in Belgium little was known of it all, save in the devastated villages themselves, and by M. Carton de Wiart, the Minister of Justice in Brussels, who was preparing an official report to present to the Powers.

The hideous atrocities perpetrated during that bloody fortnight, from August 6th to the 20th, during which the country north of Liége was being swept by fire and sword, were being hidden from the gallant little nation.

In the great high-up Château de Sévérac they only knew of them by rumour, and whenever Aimée told what she had heard over the telephone to her father sitting there so grave and morose, he always shook his head and declared that they were only wild rumours.

"The German soldiers are civilised. They do not shoot women, my dear girl," he would always declare. The true stories of the Kaiser's "frightful examples"

—which his bloody Majesty himself admitted—had not yet been told. The Baron and his family did not know how, at Aerschot, the male inhabitants who crossed their thresholds were seized and shot under the eyes of their wives and children ; how poor M. Thielemans, the Burgomaster, and his fifteen-year-old son, with a dozen prominent citizens, were set up against a wall and shot, and their bodies cast unceremoniously into a hole. They knew not how young girls, and even little children, had been raped at Orsmael ; how wounded Belgian soldiers were tied to telegraph poles and shot ; how, constantly, Red Cross waggons bearing doctors and wounded were deliberately fired upon ; or how these Teuton apostles of “kultur” had actually mounted machine-guns in their own Red Cross vans and fired at the unsuspecting ! Of the awful scenes in St. Trond, Velm, and Haelen, rumour only gave the faintest outline, which was dismissed as imaginary and without foundation.

Alas ! however, it was the bitter and terrible truth. Abominable deeds were committed not only in those places, but at Sempst men had their arms and hands cut off ; at Corbeek Loo women and girls were bayoneted ; at Seraing the blood-guilty ruffians massacred several hundred people, and in more than one village terrified women were made to pass in front of machine-guns amid the laughter of the drunken German soldiers and their threats to blow them out of existence at any moment.

Was it any wonder that many poor wretches went stark mad with terror ?

Over this stricken country, between Liège and Louvain, towards Brussels, the “Flying Column”

were fighting—struggling along bravely from day to day against the most fearful odds.

While Aimée sat, hour after hour in silence, watching and wondering, Edmond with his Maxim was doing terrible execution. Yet of what use was it, all? They were being gradually driven back towards Brussels, compelled to leave the villagers to their fate.

The roads were crowded by homeless men, women, and children, poor wretched people who had watched their homes sacked and burnt. For years they had been thrifty, and saved until they could live in quiet comfort, still working hard. Yet in one short fortnight all had gone from them; all they now possessed was piled into a wheelbarrow, perambulator, or cart, or else carried in a sack upon their backs.

The scenes on that wide, open main road leading through Louvain and Tirlemont to Brussels, a well-kept highway, lined in places by tall poplars, were enough to cause one's heart to bleed.

Edmond looked upon them with a sigh. Beneath the pitiless sun the never-ceasing crowd moved westward, driven on by the advancing German army. All sorts of ramshackle vehicles were mixed up in the slowly moving mass of humanity who were tramping their way, day and night, on and on to some place of safety—where, they knew not—Brussels, Antwerp, or to Ghent, Ostend, or perhaps the sea. The iron of despair was in their souls.

Such a human tide as this, naturally, hampered the Belgian army severely. Weary, footsore, and sad-eyed, many old persons fainted by the wayside, and those who were friendless were left there to die. Everybody was thinking of his or her own family.

They had no time for sympathy with others.' Most of them were dressed in their best clothes—in order to save them—and all had fearful tales to tell of the behaviour of the Uhlans. Many of those poor, red-eyed, hatless women in black had seen their husbands, brothers, sons, or lovers shot down before their eyes. Some had been falsely accused of firing at the troops, some had simply been seized by drunken, laughing soldiers; some had been questioned by swaggering German officers, others had not. With all, trial or no trial, the end was the same—death.

And their corpses had been left to rot where they fell, and the village fired by those little black cubes of a highly inflammable chemical substance, which the brutes carried with them for that one purpose.

The fog of war was over everything.

"It is not warfare, father," declared Aimée one evening, as she sat with her parents in a big, handsome salon, wherein the last blood-red light of the fiery afterglow was fast fading. "It is massacre. They have just told me, over the telephone, of fearful things that have happened in Aerschot. The Germans have wrecked the beautiful church, smashed the holy statues, desecrated the crucifix, and stabled their horses there. And these are the troops upon whom the Kaiser is beseeching God's blessing. It is all too awful for words!"

"Yes, child," replied the grey-haired Baroness, looking up from her embroidery—for in these days of excitement she tried to occupy her mind with her needlework. "The Kaiser respects neither the laws of nations, nor the laws of Almighty God, Whose aid he asks. His evil deeds cry aloud to Heaven, and to us who, horror-struck, are watching."

"The Emperor is carrying out the policy, which I read yesterday in the *Indépendance*, advocated by Bismarck," said the Baron. "The Iron Chancellor laid it down, as a maxim, that true strategy consisted in hitting the enemy hard, and in inflicting on the inhabitants of invaded towns the maximum of suffering, so that they might bring pressure upon their Government to discontinue it. He is declared to have said: 'You must leave the people through whom you march only their eyes to weep with.'"

"The inhuman brute!" ejaculated the Baroness. "But our dear Belgium will never sue for peace."

"Never," declared the Baron fiercely, rising and passing to the window, an erect, refined figure. "We have the British on our side. They will quickly wipe the Germans from the seas, and then come here to our assistance. The speech of Asquith in the House of Commons shows their intentions. Besides, have we not Russia—a colossal power in Europe when she commences to move? So we may rest assured that for every evil and unwarrantable act committed upon our soil, ample vengeance will be exacted when the Cossacks are let loose upon our friends of Berlin."

"They say that at Liège and in other places, German spies have been discovered," Aimée remarked. "I hear that at the entrance to Liège, the German soldiers were actually met by spies—hitherto respectable inhabitants of the place—who acted as their guides through the city, and pointed out the principal buildings and the residences of the rich."

"Exaggerated stories," declared the Baron. "I do not believe in the existence of German spies in Belgium."

"But they have arrested many both in Brussels and Antwerp."

"Spy-mania seems to arise in every war," was his reply.

"But Germany has been long preparing. Her spies are said to be everywhere," declared the girl with emphasis. "No game is too low or despicable for the enemy to play, it seems."

At that moment the liveried footman entered and, bowing, announced to the Baron

"Monsieur Rigaux has arrived"

"Ah! show him in. He may have news," cried his master, eagerly.

Next moment the thin-faced, dark-haired man, wearing a smart grey suit and yellow gloves, came forward all smiles and graces, as he bowed low over the Baroness's hand and then over Aimée's.

"Well, my dear Arnaud?" the Baron commenced anxiously. "What is the latest from the front? Have you motored from Brussels?"

"Yes And the news is disquieting—distinctly disquieting. Max, the Burgomaster, is already taking precautions in anticipation of the occupation of the capital by the enemy. Our troops are evacuating the city."

Mother and daughter exchanged glances, both pale-faced and startled at such a turn of events.

"Then we have again been defeated," exclaimed the Baron in a hard voice.

"It seems so. The news is out that Liège has fallen at last. The forts are silent—reduced to rubbish-heaps."

"Liège fallen!" gasped both mother and daughter.

"Yes. It seems that several days ago the Germans

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brought up some big Krupp howitzers, the secret of which has been so admirably kept, and——”

“Why do you say so admirably, M'sieur Rigaux !” interrupted Aimée quickly. “Such words would make it appear that you admire the Germans”

The man started. His eyes narrowed, and his face assumed a sinister look. But only for a second. He saw the slip he had made, and hastily corrected it.

“My dear Mademoiselle,” he laughed. “Surely you cannot suspect me of pro-German sympathies ? I hate the Kaiser, and all his abominable works. I used the words ‘admirably kept’ because in Germany they really know how to keep a secret. They are not like the English, for example, who will show any foreigner of distinction over their latest Dreadnoughts, or their strongest defences.”

“Well, the tone in which you spoke was certainly as though you entertained pro-German tendencies,” said the girl frankly, adding “but what about these wonderful guns ?”

“Ah ! Mademoiselle. They are wonderful, alas ! As soon as they got these fearful engines of destruction into position they simply pulverised the forts. Poor General Leman was taken out of the ruins, unconscious, and is now a prisoner in Germany.”

“Leman a prisoner !” gasped the Baron. “Why, it was only a month ago that he dined here with us.”

“Poor fellow !” exclaimed the Baroness. “But why was he unconscious ?”

“Owing to the deadly fumes from the explosion. One of the big shells from the German howitzer penetrated to the magazine, and it blew up.”

"Ah! But Leman did not surrender."

"Certainly not," said Rigaux, who was, in secret, very well informed of all that was in progress along the front. His wireless—worked by a German naval wireless operator who lived in seclusion in his house at Brussels—had, for days been picking up all the official messages, the operator having in his pocket the key to the war-cipher.

Not a move on land or on sea on the part of the Germans but was known at once to Arnaud Rigaux, who daily handed to the fair-haired young operator a brief report of what was in progress in Brussels. This the young man reduced to code and transmitted it, after having called up the German station at Nauen. Other stations heard it, but the message being in a code specially supplied for the purpose, it conveyed to them no meaning.

Arnaud Rigaux, the most clever and most dangerous spy which Germany possessed on Belgian soil, was, because of his high position as a financier, still unsuspected.

From his manner the Baron could see that his friend had come out from Brussels hastily, in order to tell him something which he hesitated to do in the presence of the ladies.

"So an advance is really being made towards Brussels and the Government has moved to Antwerp?" Aimée asked anxiously. "The papers are so vague about it all."

"I fear that is so," was Rigaux's reply. "It seems, too, that the British are moving uncommonly slowly. They have not yet, it is said, embarked their expeditionary force, as we fully expected they would have done days ago."

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"The British, if they move slowly, always move very surely," was the girl's reply. "I was at school in England, you know, and I am quite aware of their slowness."

"It is fatal in war, Mademoiselle. Why are they not here to help us—eh? We have relied upon them."

"They will be here soon, and when they come they will give a good account of themselves, never fear. They are tried soldiers. The Germans have never seen a modern war. They are only swaggerers."

"True. But they are at least scientific in their campaign. The English are not."

"Well, Arnaud, if you continue to talk like that I shall begin to agree with Aimée, and accuse you of taking the German side," laughed her father.

"*Diable!* I hate them too much. Look what I have lost—what I stand to further lose—eh?" protested the thin-faced man, with a quick gesture of the hands. "All I hope is that the English army will be in Belgium before the enemy enters Brussels."

"But the French," suggested the Baron. "What are they doing? One hears so very little of General Joffré and his army!"

"Ah! he, too, is moving slowly. At Verdun, and along the line of Alsace-Lorraine, there has been some fierce fighting, I hear."

"How do you know?" asked the girl.

"By the papers."

"But the papers have published no reports," she said in surprise. "What journal has given the news? We have them all, and I read them very carefully."

Again Rigaux was, for a second, nonplussed. .

"Oh ! I think it was in the Antwerp *Matin*—the day before yesterday—if I recollect aright."

The truth was that he had heard it over his secret wireless only that morning.

"Who won ?"

"Unfortunately, the Germans."

"Ah !" sighed the girl. "It is always so. When shall we ever have a victory ?"

"Who knows, Mademoiselle ? Let us hope it will be very soon. Belgium will never be crushed."

"Not so long as a single man remains alive who can carry a gun," declared the Baron fiercely. "I wish I were younger. I'd go to the front at once and do my share."

"As Edmond Valentin has gone," Aimée remarked, more in order to spite Arnaud Rigaux than anything else.

In a second the spy's face was wreathed in smiles.

"Ah, how is M'sieur Valentin ? where is he, Mademoiselle ?" he inquired.

"He is with the Eighth Chasseurs-à-pied, somewhere near Liége."

"He is not near Liége now," their visitor said.

"The whole country, up to Louvain, is now held by the enemy. His brigade has, I expect, been thrown back to somewhere near Brussels—unless, of course, it has come south, towards Namur."

In an instant the girl was eager and anxious. Namur, with its great forts, believed to be impregnable, was only a few miles away.

"Would they come across in this direction, do you think ?" she asked eagerly.

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"Certainly. If they were in the Meuse Valley they might follow it up towards Huy, and onward."

"But there has been no sign of the enemy along there."

"There will be soon, I fear, Mademoiselle. We are not sufficiently strong to keep them back."

As a matter of fact, he knew that Uhlan patrols were in the woods within fifteen miles of them, and that very soon the whole Meuse Valley would probably run with blood. The Potsdam plan of campaign was to sweep every part of Belgium, from the frontier to the sea, with the fire of war.

"What shall we do if they come?" asked the pale-faced girl, dismayed. "Is it best to stay here?"

"I believe so. You are far safer here in your château than in Brussels."

"But what will happen to us?"

"Oh, you may have a visit, perhaps, from a polite German officer who may billet some of his men here for the night. He will simply apologise for the inconvenience he causes. That is all."

"But they have been massacring people north of Liège," Aimée remarked.

"Bah! those are simply exaggerated tales of the country-people. Do not credit them, Mademoiselle. Nobody in Brussels believes them. In war, such tales are always told," he said assuringly.

"Who is commanding the Eighth Chasseurs? Do you know?" asked the girl anxiously.

"Well, yes, I happen to know because Jacques, my second chauffeur, is in the regiment of Monsieur Valentin. They belong to the Sixth Brigade under General Paul Thalmann."

"Thalmann!" echoed the Baroness. "Ah, we know him quite well. He was commandant at Bruges a year ago. Then he was moved to Ghent. Aimée and I stayed with him for three days during the Exhibition. A fine old soldier. One of the best men in all Belgium."

Arnaud Rigaux smiled curiously. The Hebrew came out in him at that moment.

"Yes," he said, with slight hesitation. "But a gambler, my dear Baroness. He is in my debt to a considerable extent. Besides, I—well, I suspect him."

"Of what?" asked the great financier.

"Of dealings with the enemy."

Aimée started.

"What do you mean, m'sieur?" she asked quickly.

"I simply mean what I say, Mademoiselle. General Thalmann has, to my knowledge, been on the verge of bankruptcy for the past three years. He is a bosom friend of a certain Karl Schnerb, whom I have long suspected of being a secret agent of Germany. After his acquaintance with Schnerb, the General began to repay me some of what I had lent him. *Voilà tout!*"

"You say, then, that General Thalmann is in the pay of our enemies?" asked Aimée quickly.

"You surely don't mean that, Arnaud?" asked her father at the same moment.

"I only tell you facts that I know, my dear Baron," was their visitor's reply. "And for that reason, and that alone, I say: 'May God help our poor little Belgium.'"

Aimée was silent.

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Was it possible that a traitor was in command of Edmond's brigade ?

The girl held her breath. If what Arnaud Rigaux had alleged was the actual truth—and he always knew the truth—if such things were, then poor little Belgium was, alas ! doomed.

CHAPTER IX

THE KAISER'S SECRET AGENT

"THE position is a very grave one, Henri," Rigaux explained when, a few minutes later, they were alone together in a small, circular, book-lined room, that room below one of the high round towers of the château, which the Baron used as a bureau. "I hesitated to speak very openly before your wife, because it would cause her undue alarm. There is no doubt—indeed, there has been abundant proof in these last four days—that Belgium swarms with German spies. They are everywhere. Our enemies have been most crafty and cunning in their preparations for our undoing. They have arrested and shot sixteen German agents in Antwerp alone. They had carrier pigeons, secret wireless, code-books, German ammunition, secret stores of petrol, and other things, which showed, only too plainly, their intentions. Now your telephone was cut at noon to-day, was it not, and you are wondering ? Well, the truth is that the Germans occupied Brussels at eleven o'clock this morning !"

"*They are in Brussels !*" gasped the Baron, starting up. "You must be joking !"

"I am not, I regret to say. To-day, at eleven, Burgomaster Max met the German commander in the Chaussée de Louvain. There was no resistance, and the enemy marched into the city, doing the goose-step as they passed the Gare du Nord."

"Impossible!" gasped de Neuville, pale as death.

"But it is the unfortunate truth. The Germans are asking for an indemnity of eight millions sterling. The Minister of Finance has asked me to negotiate the loan. Will you and your friends take part in it?"

For a moment the Baron de Neuville was silent. He knew the financial straits of the Government at that moment, and he was reflecting.

At last he said, in a low, earnest voice:

"Arnaud, if I touch it at all, my friends in London and myself will make the whole loan."

"What, you will bear the eight millions?" asked Rigaux, with some surprise.

"Yes. I feel it my duty to assist in the present crisis."

"But I only asked for a portion. I can do some myself, and obtain the remainder in Holland."

"I tell you I will arrange to bear the whole responsibility. I will send word to Monsieur Max to-night. I can arrange with good substantial friends in London to assist me."

Rigaux was silent for a few seconds.

"Well," he said enthusiastically at last, "yours is indeed a fine example of patriotism, Henri. I will let Max know your generous offer. There is no telegraphic or telephonic communication with Brussels now."

He did not add that in his pocket was a special pass, signed by the German commander, which allowed him to go through the enemy's lines, backwards and forwards, at will. If the Baron and his friends paid over eight millions to the enemy, then his friends in Berlin would be highly pleased at his clever diplomacy.

"You return to Brussels to-night—eh?"

"Yes, at once. It is a risky business to be on the roads at night nowadays."

"I shall go to Brussels to-morrow, and make the offer personally," the Baron said.

"But, if you do so, you will not leave your wife and daughter here. If I were you I would send them to Ostend, where, if further trouble occurs, they can easily cross to England. They should not be left here alone. One never knows what may happen."

The Baron did not reply. He was still reassured by the words of certain highly-placed officials in Brussels that the Baroness and Aimée would be quite safe at Sévérac, and Rigaux, on his part, did not think it worth while to tell him of the close proximity of the Uhlans.

"I shall see you in Brussels to-morrow," the Baron said briefly.

"Yes. May I tell Max that you will be at the Hôtel de Ville at noon—eh?" asked the secret agent of the Kaiser, "and that you and your English friends will, if necessary, guarantee the loan to the municipality of the eight millions demanded?"

"Yes," was his friend's reply.

"Ah, Henri," cried Arnaud Rigaux, "you are a true patriot. You, the wealthiest man in Belgium, to come forward at such a time." And, Judas-like,

he took the Baron's hand—he who was now secretly acting as financial agent of the German Government. "Monsieur Max has been made responsible for the good behaviour of the capital, and they have handed him back his scarf of office. The surrender was a sad and impressive scene, I can assure you," he added.

"Ah, yes," replied the Baron very gravely. "I had no idea that the enemy were already in Brussels."

"Yes. They have taken Liège, Tirlemont, and Louvain, and are now coming up to bombard Namur."

"So near!" cried the broad-shouldered Baron, amazed.

"Yes. That is why I suggest to you, privately, that the ladies should be sent at once to the coast."

"Thanks for your hint, my dear Arnaud. I will certainly consider it," was the other's reply.

He handed Rigaux the big silver box of cigarettes, and when both had lit up, the footman brought, in response to his master's summons, two tiny Bohemian liqueur glasses and filled them with fine old cognac.

They tossed them off, in Belgian fashion, and soon afterwards Rigaux gripped his friend's hand, saying :

"*Au revoir*, till to-morrow. And all Belgians will thank you, Henri, for saving their capital from the Kaiser's brigands."

The Baron de Neuville smiled, and shrugged his thick-set shoulders.

"It is but my duty as a loyal Belgian. I cannot fight side by side with our brave men, as I certainly would if I were younger. So I will help as far as my means permit."

And then Arnaud Rigaux, with those words in his

ears, waved his hand and descended the winding stairway to the great hall, outside which in the courtyard his fast, open car was in waiting.

Having put on his holland dust-coat, he flung himself into the bucket-seat next the driver, and then they moved away cautiously down the steep hill into the peaceful valley, where the summer twilight was fast darkening into night.

Many groups of homeless, despairing people, hauling along great packages and tramping towards an unknown bourne, were upon the road, and now and then suspicious cars passed without salute or challenge.

Once they met a patrol of Uhlans riding merrily along, big-booted fellows with lances, who chatted gaily, and who seemed to take no notice of them, knowing that in that particular area there was no opposition.

Suddenly Rigaux, who had now become very alert, remarked to the driver :

" Be careful. We are getting near Loveral, outside Charleroi."

Before them had suddenly showed points of light from lanterns in the road, and then, a few hundred yards further on, they heard a gruff challenge in German, and a stern command to halt.

The driver drew up at once, and the car was instantly surrounded by half a dozen stalwart German outposts, their fixed bayonets shining in the headlights, demanding to know the destination of the travellers.

" To Brussels," replied Rigaux, in German. " Here is my official permit from headquarters, signed by the Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the Meuse."

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The sentry, in his spiked helmet, examined it beneath the flickering light of a lantern held by one of his comrades, and while doing so a lieutenant strolled up and also carefully scrutinised it. Yet for the moment the motorists were under arrest.

"Herr Rigaux—eh ?—and chauffeur ?" the officer read. "A general secret service pass from headquarters. You are going to Brussels, I suppose ?"

Arnaud Rigaux replied in the affirmative, whereupon the lieutenant gave an order and the half-dozen men drew up in the dark, clicking their heels together, and presented arms in salute.

"You are free to pass, Herr Rigaux," said the officer. "Take the left-hand road, and you will avoid the outposts of Charleroi and get to Nivelles. Our lines are two miles farther on, but with your pass you will have no difficulty. I see that you are one of us."

Rigaux remounted into his car, and with a merry good night they swept along the dark, wide road, which at that point ran between two rows of high poplars, which were swaying and rustling slightly in the cool night wind, so refreshing after the broiling day.

Half a dozen times the car had been challenged in as many miles, but on each occasion the permit to travel was scrutinised closely, and as they went forward they saw in the sky, on the far-off horizon, the dull, red glare of the fires of war. They had left Charleroi on their right—the town of hardware, which the Germans had now surrounded, and intended on the morrow to reduce—and had now set their faces straight for the capital.

The pass which that morning Rigaux had received,

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on application to the headquarters at the Hôtel Cosmopolite, in Brussels, proved an open-sesame everywhere, for it was one of those cryptic passports which the German Empire had issued to all its spies, from the lowly to the wealthy.

That small piece of grey paper, stamped, signed, and countersigned, rendered its bearer immune from arrest, and provided safe conduct everywhere. What would his friends the Belgians say, or do, if they had known he had possessed such a document ?

Time after time, on that dark, straight road between Charleroi and Brussels, the car was held up by men in spiked helmets, who covered both master and chauffeur threateningly with their rifles. But sight of that paper was magical. Arnaud Rigaux was bowed to with politeness, and urged onward with cautionary words to the next post.

Brussels lay thirty miles from Charleroi. They were now within the enemy's lines, and were passing many burnt-out cottages and villages, some of the debris of which, strewn in the roadway, still glowed red in the night. Before them, in the dark, heavy sky, showed the glare of the lights of Brussels, the gay little city which now lay crushed and invested by the Teuton invaders.

The reflection of the light was not red, as in the case of a burning town. The Germans were committing no atrocities there, for the simple reason that, in the capital, they were beneath the eyes of the representatives of neutral powers. In the country it mattered not, and could easily be denied, but in Brussels the Commander-in-Chief had decreed that all should preserve a correct attitude and present the quintessence of German "culture."

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It was nearly one o'clock in the morning when at last, Rigaux having pulled his cap over his eyes, they passed the sentries outside the station of Uccle, and were allowed to proceed down the long, straight Avenue Brugmann and the Chaussée to the end of the Avenue Louise.

Half the street lamps of Brussels were out, and no one was in the streets save German sentries at the corners, acting as policemen, their fixed bayonets glinting in the brilliance of the car's headlights. Brussels, with her Civil Guard disbanded, was in the grip of the invader, who modestly demanded eight millions as its ransom.

The car turned into the small Place Louise, past the café in the corner, and De Boek's Hotel so long a famous "English house," turned to the left, and then ran along the tree-lined boulevard to where Rigaux lived.

There was now no secrecy of presence of the fair-haired German naval wireless operator, for the enemy had occupied the capital. Indeed, as soon as Arnaud Rigaux arrived home he met him in the hall, and accompanied him to the room in the roof, in which was that powerful wireless plant run off the electric-light main.

The young fellow seated himself at once at his table, and, touching a Morse-key, a long blue spark was emitted and crackled across the big coil.

"Call up Nauen," Rigaux said, his holland dust-coat not yet removed. "Give them this message: That the Baron de Neuville has consented, upon representations I have made, to negotiate the whole of the indemnity of eight millions levied upon the

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city of Brussels. Let me know of the acknowledgment of the receipt of the message by R. X."

"Certainly, m'sieur," was the operator's reply in good French, and he began to tap out the preliminary "Da-de-Da de-Da," the call-signal, followed by the code-letters indicating that he wished to speak with Nauen.

Then he switched over, and adjusting his headphones to his ears, listened attentively.

Again he repeated the call, with dexterous rapidity, when, a few seconds later, he heard the answering ticks of the Telefunken near Potsdam, after which he reduced to code the significant message which Rigaux had given him for transmission, and tapped it out.

CHAPTER X

THE HÔTEL DE L'ÉPÉE

THE quaint, old-world little town of Dinant, with its crooked cobbled streets—the resort of painters and dreamers—lay in a narrow ravine on both sides of the winding Meuse, connected by a long iron bridge. High limestone cliffs towered above the town, crowned by a good-sized but out-of-date citadel—a fort which dominated the whole country. Across the river lay the railway station, and some modern hotels, while the modern town was built upon the pleasant wooded slopes behind.

It was here that Edmond Valentin found himself with the Sixth Brigade. Five days ago they had arrived, after a forced march under the hot sun, from

Gembloux, beyond Namur, and, having joined the French force which had crossed the frontier between Sedan and Givet, they were occupying the heights above the town. Indeed, from where Edmond stood on that bright, sunny morning, he could look down upon the tiny little white village of Anseremme, just beyond Dinant, the place where he had, on that memorable day before the war, lunched with Aimée so happily on the long rose-embowered *terrasse* beside the river, now sparkling in the sun.

Had the red tide of war yet reached high-up Sévérac, he wondered? It was not far off—perhaps fifteen miles or so beyond those blue hills. Daily—nay, hourly—he thought of her, wondering how she fared in those hot, breathless days when Belgium was fighting so desperately for her very existence as a nation.

The Sixth Brigade, under General Thalmann—the fine, grey-moustached, well-set-up man, who had been so grossly calumnified by Rigaux for his own crafty purposes—had been in the very thick of the fighting ever since that day when they had so suddenly arrived in Liège and found themselves in the firing-line. They had helped to repulse the German cavalry at Haelen, and had then fought their way desperately up to Tirlemont, to Gembloux, and back to the Meuse again. With scarce any sleep they had been in touch with the enemy practically the whole time, and were, indeed, “The Flying Column” of the Belgian army. Their losses around Charleroi had been considerable, and though so weary, dusty, and worn, not a man among them was dismayed. The spirit of the men was admirable.

General Joffré had already held council with the

Belgian Commander-in-Chief, a council at which General Thalmann had been present, and from information they had gathered it was well known that the Germans intended to make an assault upon the town of Dinant, and take the citadel as one of the important and strategic points on the Meuse.

The peaceful inhabitants of the place—which, besides being a tourist centre, possessed a thriving trade in beaten brass-ware, and the making of those grotesquely-shaped cakes of honey and flour called *conques*, two industries which had survived in the place ever since the Middle Ages—were, of course, in ignorance, and the authorities did not deem it expedient to express their fears, in order, if possible, to avoid panic.

Edmond knew that the French army, on its way up the Meuse Valley, must have passed beneath the great old château of Sévérac. If so, Aimée must have watched those long, interminable lines of red-trouserred infantry, trudging on with their piled-up haversacks, the squadrons of heavily-booted cavalry, and the snake-like processions of lumbering field-guns, motor transport wagons, and drab vans marked with the red cross.

Away across those blue hills, in the direction of France, Aimée was probably watching and waiting in patience. He longed to write to her, to send her words of hope and courage. But it was all utterly impossible. No letter could ever reach her now, unless he could find means to deliver it himself.

There was fighting in progress behind them—fierce fighting at Charleroi—for they had learnt, only an

hour ago over the field-telephone, that the Germans were attacking the place, and that a big battle had already opened.

The first few hours of that hot, breathless day were hours of inactivity, welcome indeed to the hard-pressed Sixth Brigade.

Edmond's company had piled their arms, and were lying about on the sun-scorched grass behind the citadel, smoking cigarettes and laughing as gaily as though they were at manœuvres, when of a sudden a German Taube aeroplane, distinguishable by its shape, was seen crossing them at a great altitude, whereupon many rifles were raised at it. But it was far beyond range, and circled round and round over their camp, taking observations.

"The enemy must be near," remarked a thin, little, dust-covered lieutenant to a brother-officer. "They intend to attack, without a doubt."

Hardly had he spoken when the aeroplane dropped two smoke-balls, indicating the position of the defenders, and then sailed away across the hills and was lost to view.

The old fortress in front of Edmond was occupied by Belgian artillery ready for a desperate defence; but the force, though a gallant one, was, unfortunately, not large.

Another hour went by. The men were still at ease, for perhaps, after all, the enemy, with the strongly fortified town of Namur before them lower down the river, might not think Dinant worth attack.

Suddenly, however, the truth became revealed.

Somewhere over in the direction of Sévérac the enemy had taken up positions, and without warning

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a shell fell unexpectedly upon the railway station, narrowly missing the clock, crashing through the roof, and exploding with a crash which reverberated along the whole valley.

In a moment bugles sounded and the defenders were instantly on the alert. A second shell tore out part of the front of the Hôtel des Postes, opposite the station, and then, from the citadel the guns thundered in reply, sending shells in the direction where the grey masses of the enemy were seen to be.

To watch the battle from that height was fascinating to Edmond. Below, a French captain and a squad of couriers on motor-cycles crossed the bridge rapidly and disappeared on the road to Namur, while, in the town, a few French troops of the line regiments were marching. The inhabitants were all indoors with closed doors and shutters, most of them crowding into the cellars in fear.

Soon the cliffs resounded with rifle and gun fire, while away in the east could be heard the continual rumble of the field howitzers of the enemy. The Germans had, it seemed, also brought up several mountain-batteries along the hills.

The enemy were advancing rapidly.

The bridge was being defended strongly by the French troops, while, very soon, members of the Volunteer Hospital Corps began hurrying along the streets in search of the wounded.

In half an hour the quiet, prosperous little town where, from the bulgy slate-covered steeple of the church the bells had, for centuries, sent their sweet carillon over the river, became swept by lead. Beneath the pitiless shell fire the houses in the narrow

Rue Grande were suffering severely and, at certain spots the street were covered with falling debris, a rubble of stones and mortar mixed with articles of furniture.

Half-way down that long, narrow street, so well known to summer visitors to the Ardennes, there stood, on the left, a quaint old-fashioned little inn called the Hôtel de l'Épée—the Hotel of the Sword—one of the most ancient houses in Dinant, for it dated from the fifteenth century, and had then been part of a Franciscan Monastery. The rooms were small, with their original old oaken panelling, the floors were of great stone slabs hollowed by the feet of many generations, and though the little place was typical of the Ardennes, there was a curious medieval air about it which was genuine.†

The Hotel of the Sword was kept by a stout, prosperous, red-faced old Belgian named François Mazy, who usually wore the blue linen blouse of the Ardennois. "Uncle François" was known to all Dinant, on account of his cheery good-nature and charitable disposition. And to his homely inn, each summer, went many well-known people of Brussels, because there they fared exceedingly well—Uncle François doing the cooking himself, and charging his visitors, in each of whom he took a real personal interest, only very modestly as compared with the more modern houses.

To Uncle François' hundreds of the townspeople, men, women, and terrified children, now fled, because beneath the house, and running far under the cobbled street, were huge vaulted cellars hewn in the limestone rock—the cellars of the ancient monastery, the entrance to which had, only a few

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years before, been discovered behind a walled-up archway.

There, lit by flickering candles and one or two evil-smelling lamps, the great cavernous vaults of the monks of old, were filled by those poor excited and terrified people, who had taken refuge from the sudden horrors of war.

Many of them were women, anxious for their husbands' safety, and little children with big wide-open wondering eyes, while Uncle François himself, with Marie, his stout, middle-aged daughter, moved among the crowd in that hot, stifling atmosphere, uttering cheering words in his native Walloon, and trying to comfort them.

"All will be well soon, my friends," he declared "It is only a skirmish."

Meanwhile, the fight was growing hotter every moment. Edmond, with his ever-ready Maxim, had found cover behind a piece of thick, broken wall, one of the ancient earthworks of the citadel, and from there he and his men kept up a terrible rain of lead upon the oncoming Germans, who were now fighting in the Place below.

Of a sudden, a shell struck the spire of the church, blowing off part of the pumpkin-shaped top which fell into the Place with a heavy crash and clouds of dust, the beautiful bells, which had rung out there so musically for ages, coming down also.

On the long bridge, terrible fighting was now in progress. The defenders were in cover under the abutment wings of the bridge, which were about three feet high. Edmond could witness it all from where he was, three hundred feet or so above. Suddenly

there was a red flash over the river, a great roar, and the air was filled with smoke and debris.

The defenders had retired suddenly and blown up the bridge across the Meuse, to prevent the enemy's advance.

It was magnificent—yet it was terrible. On every side the town seemed to be now attacked by the enemy, who had sprung from nowhere. In the position they had taken up, the Belgian Chasseurs were barely two companies strong, and though they fought so bravely, they could see that the enemy were surely, if slowly, advancing upon the citadel.

For another hour the fearful fight went on. From behind the debris of the bridge the red-breeched French were replying gallantly to the enemy. One could hear nothing save the irregular explosions of rifles, the machine-like splutterings of the mitrailleuse punctuated by the shock of shell fire, and now and then, an explosion which caused the earth to tremble.

Owing to the heavy firing, clouds now obscured the sun. The heavens darkened, and it began to rain, but the firing in no way abated. From where Edmond crouched behind his gun he could see what was happening below in the Place, and across beyond the blown-up bridge, which lay a mass of wreckage and twisted girders across the stream.

A sudden increase in the firing told that reinforcements had arrived, and he saw a half-company of a line regiment hurriedly enter the hotel opposite the station, expecting to find there a good field of fire. They brought with them a dozen terrified,

shrieking women, whom they had found hiding in the waiting-room at the railway station.

An hour after noon the fire slackened, and the rain ceased. A few limping figures, the French in blue coats and red trousers—that unfortunately flamboyant uniform which always drew fire—staggered into the hotel, while, during the lull, a hatless woman in black calmly crossed the little Place and, quite unconcerned, dropped a card into the letter-box !

At that moment Edmond's company heard the order to retire. Retire ! Every man held his breath. Their spirits fell. Dinant had fallen, after all, notwithstanding the defence of the combined French and Belgian forces. It was hopeless. The Germans meant to crush them and to swarm over Belgium.

In perfect order the Sixth Brigade retired back, down the steep, grassy slopes behind the citadel, and within half an hour the hated German flag was, even as Edmond stood watching through his glasses a couple of miles away, hoisted over the captured citadel.

He uttered a malediction beneath his breath, and turned to hand his glasses to one of his men.

Sight of that flag was a signal for renewed fighting. Two French batteries had, happily, arrived, and having taken up a position close to them, opened fire upon the citadel from the rear. The enemy's flag had roused the defenders to fury, and one of the first shots from the French field-guns cut the German flag right across, at which the Belgians cheered wildly to the echo. The French batteries threw their shells upon the ancient citadel with marvellous accuracy, and the fire was heavy and incessant.

Another French line regiment arrived to reinforce the Belgians, marching gaily in those fatal red trousers of theirs, and then so smothering was their fire that, through his glasses, Edmond could see the heads of the Germans, dotting the ramparts of the fort, begin to gradually disappear.

For four long hot hours the desperate struggle continued without a moment's cessation. The Belgians were determined to drive the enemy from their position, while the enemy were equally determined to hold it, and the slaughter on all sides became terrible. One of Edmond's men fell forward, dead, with a bullet in his brow.

Suddenly heavier firing was heard from across the river. The French were shelling the citadel from the other side of the Meuse, and this they continued to do until, at six o'clock, a long pontoon bridge, just completed by the Germans a little higher up the river, was suddenly swept by a hail of shell and destroyed. A regiment of German infantry, who were at that moment upon it, in the act of crossing, were shattered and swept into the river, the clear waters of which became tinged with their blood. The French had waited until that moment, allowing the Germans to construct the pontoon, and had then wiped it out.

So heavy had now become the attack of the Allies upon the citadel, that not a living thing was to be seen upon the ramparts. Shell after shell fell upon them, exploding, shattering the thick masonry everywhere, and sending up columns of dense black smoke which hovered in the still evening air.

Then, of a sudden, there was a roar, and a terrific explosion of greater force than all the others before.

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which completely tore out one angle of the fortress, some of the heavy masonry falling with a huge crash down the hill-side into the Place below, which was already thick with dead and dying.

A great cheer sounded somewhere in French, for another fresh regiment had suddenly arrived.

Orders were swiftly given to the Sixth Brigade to readvance, and in half an hour Edmond found that victory was theirs after all—they had retaken the fort! The German flag was hauled down and, in wrath, destroyed, and amid vociferous cheering, the Belgian red, black, and yellow tricolour was hoisted again in its place, Edmond at last regaining the position he had held in the early morning.

Looking down upon the stricken town once again, he saw at what frightful cost the fort had been retaken. That morning peace had reigned—but alas, now?

The streets and the river-banks were dotted with the dead, French, Belgian and German, lying in all sorts of contorted attitudes, the blue coats of the French infantry splashed with red, and their red trousers, alas! stained a deeper hue.

The Germans had retired away towards Namur, it was said. The fire had ceased, and some Belgian infantry—in their round caps and blue greatcoats—moving down the narrow street from the Place, were cheered lustily. But the yells of triumph died from their lips as they saw the ambulances eagerly and silently at work, and they paused at that grim, awful testimony of what war really meant.

A big grey armoured car of the French, with the muzzle of a machine-gun pointing out, tried to pass out of the town, but was unable to do so because of

the bodies heaped in the streets, for the fronts of several houses were lying across the roadway. Then, at that moment, there was heard in the air, the whirr of a scouting aeroplane which, at a second's glance, was seen to be French, observing what positions the enemy were taking up for the night.

The sun had set, and the red afterglow—that crimson light of war—was showing in the west over where lay Great Britain, the chief objective of the Kaiser and his barbaric hordes of brigands, hangmen, executioners, and fire-bugs—the men doing the bidding of that blasphemous antichrist who was daily lifting his hands to Heaven and invoking God's blessing upon his hell-hound impieties.

In the twilight, sparks of fire were beginning to show in the shadows across the river, where the French were encamped, while below, in the town, after that thirteen hours of fierce bombardment, the Dinantais, much relieved, came forth from every cellar and every shelter to assemble in animated groups and discuss the terrible events of that never-to-be-forgotten day—a day unequalled since Charles the Bold reduced the old tower of Crève-Cœur—the Tower of the Broken Heart—opposite at Bouvignes, and the streets of the town had run with blood.

Slowly—very slowly—the twilight faded and night crept on. The quiet of death spread over the historic little town. The streets were not lit, because the electric plant had been wrecked. The great vaulted cellars of the Hotel of the Sword had disgorged its crowd of terrified refugees, and all, thankful that they had survived that fierce attack, returned to their fire-swept homes again, while the Allies holding

the town prepared their evening meal and tended their wounded, of whom, alas! there were so very many

And as night fell, Edmond Valentin, who had flung aside his shako, flung himself upon the ground near his gun, and fell to wondering—wondering as he always did—how Aimée, his dearly beloved, was faring now that the enemy had advanced up the valley, from the misty hills of the German frontier.

The men about him were smoking, laughing, and joking, but he heard them not. One thought alone filled his mind—that of Aimée, always Aimée.

CHAPTER XI

THE WORD OF THE UHLAN

THE German tidal-wave was steadily advancing. Prussia had set her heel upon Belgium.

A perfect horde of jack-booted Uhlans had swarmed over the country, and had already made themselves hated by their mad, murderous acts of cruelty and pillage. They were—as the blasphemous Kaiser had intended they should be when making his plans at Potsdam—agents of the Terror. Of the nineteen regiments of them in the German army, no fewer than fourteen were being employed to terrorise the in-offensive villagers of poor little Belgium; yet so bravely did the Belgian army fight that within twelve days the larger part of this force, in their gaily-braided uniforms and carrying their ready lances—upon which they sometimes impaled children—were

either killed, wounded, or held prisoners. These brutes, who had boasted of their "kultur," and commanded by noblemen, had been sent out to live upon the country; but they had been entrapped everywhere, and revenged themselves by acts of the most fiendish and horrible cruelty unequalled in modern history.

The Uhlans! As in the war of 1870, so now in Belgium, their very name struck terror into the hearts of the hard-working, thrifty people of Eastern Belgium.

Therefore it was hardly surprising when, one evening a week after Dinant had been stormed, Aimée, who had just ascended to her room to tidy her hair prior to sitting down to dinner with her mother, should stand white-faced and aghast when Mélanie, her dark, good-looking *femme-de-chambre*, burst in, crying:

"Ah, Mademoiselle, it is terrible—*terrible!* The Uhlans are here! They are already in the château, asking for M'sieur le Baron!"

"The Uhlans *here!*" she gasped, in an instant pale to the lips. "What can they want?"

"*Mon Dieu!* Who knows? I hope they will not kill us all!" cried the trembling maid, her face pale and scared. "I have just seen Gustave talking excitedly with two soldiers down in the great hall, while outside, in the outer courtyard, there are a lot of horses."

Aimée dashed from her pretty chintz-hung room, across to a spare room at the rear of the château, and looking down, saw, in the falling twilight, a number of horses champing their bits in the big, paved courtyard, while heavily-booted and spurred

Uhlans, in their grey service uniforms, were standing astride in groups, talking and laughing.

She held her breath. She and her mother were alone and defenceless, the Baron being in Brussels. What could they do? How should they act?

War was suddenly at their doors!

Without a moment's hesitation she ran quickly down to the great *salle-à-manger*, the walls of which were hung with rare tapestries, and where, on the table already laid with fine old silver and flowers, candles were burning in their handsome silver candelabra.

The Baroness, grey-haired and stately, sitting in an ancient high-backed chair, looked up in surprise from her book when Aimée rushed in, and exclaimed in reproof:

"My dear child, whatever has happened? Are you mad?"

"Ah! mother," cried the girl in frantic apprehension, "the Uhlans are here! They are asking below for father. The Germans are upon us at last!"

"*The Germans!*" echoed the Baroness, quite unperturbed, looking eagerly over her gold-rimmed glasses. "What can they want with us? We are doing them no harm."

"They are demanding to see father."

At that moment the liveried footman entered, trembling and pale-faced, saying:

"A German officer is demanding to see the Baron, Madame. He refuses to believe that the master is absent in Brussels. He therefore demands to see you, Madame."

The Baroness knit her brows and drew herself up

with hauteur, preserving a wonderful calm in their defenceless circumstances.

"Very well," she sighed, "I suppose I had really better see him."

A moment later a big, broad-shouldered Uhlan officer, a fair-haired Saxon, not bad-looking save for the ugly sabre-scar of his student days upon his left cheek, strode into the handsome apartment, and halting before the two ladies, clicked his spurred heels together and saluted.

In his long military boots and his Uhlan helmet this officer of the War Lord of Germany looked taller and more forbidding than he really was, yet his politeness to the Baroness and her daughter was at once reassuring.

"I sincerely regret this intrusion, Madame," he said, in almost perfect French. "I am extremely sorry I am unable to respect the privacy of your home, but, alas! it is war—the quarrel of nations."

And taking from within his grey tunic a card, he handed it to her. The Baroness glanced at it, and saw that the name was "Baron Wernher von Meyeren."

"I am in command of my platoon of the Tenth Uhlans, and we are compelled to billet upon you," he explained. "I did not wish to disturb you, ladies, but I find that the Baron himself is absent, hence I have to intrude myself upon you."

"My husband is in Brussels, at a council meeting at the Ministry of Finance," replied the Baroness de Neuville. "He gave me to understand, however, that here we should be quite safe from molestation."

The German officer, his strong hand upon the hilt of his sword, smiled grimly. He looked worn and dusty, and had the appearance of a man who had ridden far at the bidding of his superiors.

"I fear, *Baronne*, that nobody is now safe from molestation, here, in Belgium. I am no politician, only a soldier, but it seems that your gallant little country has decided to defend itself—a mouse against a lion—with unfortunate and very regrettable results. I have with me forty-five men, upon whom I have imposed the strictest orders to behave with proper decorum in your beautiful *château*. If you will please order your servants to give them food—of which they are sorely in need—they will make themselves comfortable for the night in any corner they may find." Then, turning to *Aimée*, he added politely: "*Mademoiselle* need have no fear. It is but the fortunes of war."

The *Baroness*, still quite cool, looked at him steadily for a few seconds. Then she asked:

"Cannot you billet your men upon the villagers below, in the valley?"

"Ah, I regret, *Baronne*, that that is impossible. Some of the villagers, though non-combatants, have fired at my men and killed them; therefore, in accordance with international law, their houses have been set on fire. The peaceful villages are all occupied by troops to-night, so we have been compelled to come up here."

"We have *M'sieur Rigaux* to thank for this!" cried *Aimée* to her mother. "He told us we should be quite safe here!"

The big *Uhlán* officer shrugged his shoulders, and glancing at the table already set, said:

"The unfortunate situation need not, I think, be discussed, Mademoiselle. I merely ask if I, with my two subordinate officers, may be permitted to join you at table this evening?"

The Baroness hesitated, still holding the Uhlan's card in her hand. His rank equalled that of her husband, and though they were strangers, she foresaw that any resistance might have unpleasant results for them. The German tide was undoubtedly advancing.

"Baron von Meyeren," she said at last, with considerable dignity, "this indignity you place upon us, two defenceless women, compelled as we are to entertain our enemies, is, I suppose, but the fortune of war. You and your officers are quite welcome here at my table, but I would ask you to order your men to behave with decency, for I heard—only yesterday—some terrible stories of the conduct of Uhlans further up the valley."

The officer bowed.

"Madame," he said, "I assure you that you need not have the slightest apprehension. In the German Army we punish disobedience by death. My men know that—by examples already set them."

"My daughter and I have your word, m'sieur—eh?" asked the Baroness.

"Madame," he replied, "you certainly have my solemn word. To-morrow morning we shall, I hope, relieve you of this incubus, and I trust that you will, by that time, have discovered that we are not the bloodthirsty savages which the world reports us to be."

The Baroness then called the footman and gave certain orders that the troopers below should be

entertained, while half an hour later Baron von Meyeren, who had suddenly betrayed a sabre-rattling overbearing towards the ladies, sat down at the dinner table with his two younger officers, apparently young fops from Berlin.

The Baroness and her daughter refused to sit at table with their enemies.

The swaggering German Baron did not ask for what he wanted. He simply ordered it from his orderly who stood behind him.

The wine served did not exactly suit his palate, whereupon he told the orderly to go down into the cellars and ascertain what they contained.

"Bring us up some good wine," he added in German. "The best these people have. They are sure to have something worth drinking. And give the men some also. It will keep up their spirits."

The two women were sitting at the further end of the long room, watching the weird scene, the three men laughing and eating beneath the zone of light shed by the dozen or so lighted candles.

Soon the orderly returned with six bottles of Baron de Neuville's choicest champagne. These they opened themselves, and in loud, harsh voices, brutally drank the health of their hostess and her daughter.

Beneath a veneer of polish and culture which that trio of the enemy wore, was a coarseness and brutality which were at once revealed, for they laughed uproariously, gossiping together in German, with coarse remarks, which only Aimée, sitting in silence, understood.

They swallowed the wine in tumblers—the choice

wine of Belgium's great millionaire—and very soon they demanded that the Baroness and her daughter should sit with them at table.

Again they refused, but both women discerned the drunken leers in the eyes of the men, yet believing the assurance of the Uhlan commander, the word of a German nobleman, they were not frightened. Nevertheless the swords those men wore at their sides bore the blood of the innocent people massacred to provide the "frightful examples" which the Kaiser had laughingly given to their brave little nation, which had no quarrel with the bombastic and treacherous monarch who had self-styled himself the War Lord of Europe.

"Come, Mademoiselle!" cried von Meyeren. "Do not sit over there. We are enemies, but we will not hurt you. And you, Baroness!" he cried, rising and going across to them, "I insist upon your having dinner. It is not fair, is it, Heinrich?" he asked, addressing the elder of the pair.

"No. The Baroness must join us. She must," he said.

The two women refused, but with their heads elevated by wine the three men insisted, and at last, in order to pacify them, the mother and daughter consented to sit at the further end of the table, though they would eat nothing.

"Here's health to the Fatherland!" cried the younger of the three, getting up unsteadily and spilling his wine as he raised it to his lips amid the "Hochs" of his two companions.

The scene was surely as disgraceful as it was unexpected. Baron de Neuville's wife and daughter left there, alone and unprotected, in that great

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medieval château, had accepted the word of honour of a Saxon nobleman. They had never expected to witness such a scene of drunkenness as that !

Suddenly, from somewhere below, sounded men's shouts and women's screams. Were the men below drunk, like their officers ? Again and again was the uproar repeated.

The Baroness rang the bell, but there was no response.

"Whatever can be happening below ?" asked Aimée, full of fear. Now that the officers were drunk, what hope was there for the Kaiser's barbaric savages in the servants' hall ?

Again the bell was rung, when Mélanie, in her cap and apron, dashed into the room, crying

"Ah ! Madame ! It is terrible—*terrible* ! The soldiers are wrecking the *salon*. They are ripping the furniture with their swords. They are all drunk, Madame—the beasts are all drunk !"

The girl was flushed and dishevelled. Her hair was down, and she was panting, having, truth to tell, just escaped the embraces of a too amorous German in his cups.

The cultured Baron Wernher von Meyeren heard the maid's complaint to her mistress, and laughed heartily.

"Our men are evidently enjoying themselves," he remarked in German to his two brother officers. "This Baron de Neuville is the richest man in Belgium. It is fun to be in his house—is it not ? And his daughter is pretty too. What do you think—eh ?"

Aimée overheard the words of the "blonde beast."

She stood boldly before him, and turned upon him like a tiger.

"You Uhlans!" cried her mother. "Your very regiment is synonymous of all that is treacherous and ill-begotten. If you do not respect women, then I believe all that is told of you. Let your God-cursed Emperor let loose his hordes upon us, but the day will come, and is not far distant, when the finger of God will be placed upon you, and you, a nobleman of Saxony, will be withered and die as a stickleback will die beneath the sun."

"Oh, mother! Do be careful what you say. Pray be careful?" urged Aimée, clinging to her beseechingly.

The gallant Baron, with crimson face, rose unsteadily, gripping the edge of the table to prevent himself from falling, and in fierce anger cried:

"For those words to us, woman, your house shall suffer," and drawing his sword, he swept from the table the beautiful epergnes of flowers and china baskets of fruit, and, staggering to the wall, he slashed viciously the fine old tapestries, in his frantic drunken rage.

"Ernst," he hiccoughed to one of the officers, "tell the men below that this Belgian woman has insulted us while we are her guests, and let them make an example of this fine Baron's castle."

"No, no!" shrieked Aimée. "No, I beg of you, Baron—I beg of you to spare our home. Remember your word to us!" cried the girl frantically in German.

But he only laughed triumphantly in her face, and the man he addressed as Ernst, having left to do his bidding, he with the other officer and two grey-

coated orderlies, gleefully commenced to wreck the splendid room, while the two terrified women, clinging to each other, stood in a corner watching how they vented their mad ire upon all on which they could lay their hands.

In a few moments they were slashing the upholstery with their swords, tearing down and destroying the ancient Flemish tapestries, while the Baron himself paid particular attention to the pictures—all valuable old masters—defacing and destroying them one by one.

"See, woman! what we will now do with this snug home of yours!" he said in his drunken frenzy as, taking up an iron poker from the big open grate, he attacked the beautiful old chandelier of Venetian glass suspended in the centre of the room, smashing it to fragments.

The yells of the men in the adjoining apartments mingled with the smashing of furniture and loud, drunken laughter, reached them where they stood. They told their own tale. Everywhere in that splendid old château destruction was being carried on at the express orders of the cultured Baron von Meyeren, one of Germany's noblemen.

"Wreck the place!" he yelled to half a dozen burly Uhlans who burst in, two of them holding bottles in their hands. "And we will make a bonfire afterwards. This woman has cursed us, and we, as German soldiers, will teach her a lesson she will not easily forget!"

Poor Mélanie had disappeared, but above the terrible disorder and wild shouting were the shrieks of the female servants below, while a smell of fire suddenly greeted their nostrils.

"Look, mother ! there's smoke !" gasped Aimée in terror. "They have set the château on fire !"

As she spoke, two of the Uhlans had torn down a huge picture—part of an altar-piece from a church at Antwerp—which occupied the whole of the end wall of the room, and were kicking their big boots through the priceless canvas. It was a picture attributed to Rubens.

"Come, child, let us go," whispered the Baroness, her eyes dimmed with tears, and her face pale and set.

They turned to leave, but as they did so, the Baron caught Aimée roughly by the shoulder, and leering at her, patted her beneath the chin.

In an instant the girl, resenting such familiarity, turned upon him like a tigress and slapped his flabby face so heavily that he drew back in surprise, while the others witnessing the rebuff, laughed at his discomfort. He raised his sword with an oath, and would have cut her down had not the man called Ernst rushed forth and stayed his hand.

"Go, ladies," urged the man in French. "Escape, while there is yet time."

"Hold that girl !" shouted von Meyeren, fiercely struggling to get free from his brother-officer. But the latter held him, and barred his passage while the two terrified women dashed down the stairs, up which the black smoke was already slowly curling.

Darkness had fallen, and only here and there had the lamps been lit. Therefore the Baroness and her daughter were enabled to obtain hats and wraps and to creep down a steep, winding back staircase which was seldom used, and which the Uhlans had, fortunately, not yet discovered.

The scene was a terrible one of wholesale, wanton destruction. Some of the men were busy getting together the plate and valuables, while, just as they left, they caught sight of one man who emerged into the courtyard with the Baroness' jewel-case beneath his arm.

The thieves and murderers of the Kaiser were repeating in the beautiful Château of Sévérac, the same disgraceful methods which they had pursued in the villages of the Meuse. They respected neither God nor man, neither old age nor youth. They made war upon women, and shot down the unarmed and defenceless. Indeed, this great army of "kultur" was, in reality, but a disciplined horde of barbarians.

The Baroness and her daughter, with wraps hastily thrown about them, succeeded in escaping from the house by the postern gate, which gave entrance to a wood, but ere they left, a red glare from one of the lower rooms, shining away across the river, told only too plainly that the dastardly Uhlans had used some of their famous inflammable "confetti," and were burning the place.

The fierce, exultant yells of the drunken soldiery fell upon their ears as they plunged into the dark wood, part of the Baron's wide domain, the intricate by-paths of which were well known to Aimée.

Breathlessly they hastened on, until in the darkness beneath the trees they were compelled to slowly grope their way. Their fear was lest the woods be searched, and they might be captured, for the brutes—inflamed as they were with wine—were now in the mood for torture and for murder. Woe-betide them if they fell into their hands.

Mother and daughter pushed eagerly, breathlessly on, terrified at the fearful orgie of destruction they had just witnessed. For a full half-hour they walked, Aimée leading the way through the narrow, winding shooting-paths, until at last they came forth into the open fields.

Then they paused, scarce daring to look behind them. Alas ! at the bend of the valley, high upon its rock, Sévérac stood out vividly with flames belching fiercely from the windows of its high, round towers, and casting a blood-red glare upon the waters and across to the woods on the opposite bank.

"*Dieu !*" gasped the Baroness—"the fiends !—those hell-fiends of the Emperor !"

"Mother," exclaimed Aimée, quite calm again now that they had escaped from the hands of that brigandish band, "remember there is a God of Justice, with whom vengeance lies for wrong, and most assuredly will He, if we place our trust in Him, mete out the dread fate of death and obscurity to the arrogant Kaiser, and to all his dastardly barbarians. Let us get back to Brussels somehow. There, at least, we shall be safe."

And as they stood watching the fierce flames leap up around those ancient towers which had withstood the wars of Charles the Bold, they knew not the awful scene taking place in the courtyard, where Gustave, Mélanie, and seven other of the servants, male and female, were shot one after the other in cold blood, as they emerged in terror from the burning place. Appearance of each was being hailed by the drunken laughter of the assembled soldiers, and in escaping the fire they fell victims of the blood-lust of the brutes.

"The Red Cock is crowing all over Belgium!" shouted the Baron von Meyeren thickly, alluding to the incendiary acts of Germans being committed everywhere. We shall make a bonfire of Namur, to-morrow, my men! Hurrah! for God and the Fatherland."

And as he passed across the courtyard, for the atmosphere had now become hot and stifling, he savagely kicked aside the body of one of the young female servants who, poor thing, had been sabred in her attempt to escape.

CHAPTER XII

THE FUGITIVES

THAT flight proved indeed a hideous nightmare.

Throughout those hot, stifling hours of oppressive darkness, the Baroness de Neuville—as homeless as those hundreds of poor people on the roads, even though wife of a millionaire—wandered on, Aimée taking her arm tenderly. On, and still on they went, along the straight, open road which, leaving the Meuse, led over the hills to the straggling little whitewashed village of Winenne, which they at last reached.

There they joined a hustling crowd of terror-stricken fugitives of all classes, sad-eyed men, frightened women, and wondering children, some stern, some crying bitterly, but all carrying bundles, or pushing wheelbarrows or perambulators containing all they had saved from their lowly homes. From Winenne, the Baroness and her daughter, after trudging on

with the crowd for some distance, left the high road and took a by-way, which Aimée knew by motoring frequently over it, led due south across the hill, for ten miles or so, to Bourseigne, where lived the Baronne's brother, a large landed proprietor. In his house they had decided to seek protection. The red flush of dawn had given place to the light of day ere they came in sight of the little place, lying deep in its hollow, but as they looked eagerly upon "The Château"—as the long, white, old-fashioned house was termed—their spirits fell, for it was roofless, and its grim, blackened walls, alas! told their own tale.

A peasant on the road told them the story.

Three days ago the Germans had arrived and occupied the place, which was only three miles from the French frontier. Monsieur Hannaerts, the seigneur of the place, had been arrested as hostage for the good behaviour of the village, but, because a half-witted youth had discharged a toy-pistol at a German soldier, the unhappy gentleman had been bound to a telegraph pole at the roadside, and shot in the presence of the villagers.

An hour later the British, under General Sir John French, who had arrived at Charleroi and had extended their line towards Mézières, began to shell the village, with the result that it had been partially destroyed, the Château, which had been the enemy's headquarters, suffering most severely.

The tide of war, however, had now passed by, and when the two weary, footsore women entered the village, they found life proceeding almost as usual. Those who had not been killed had returned to their wrecked and shattered homes, and were full

of stories of the fierce brutality of the invader, which the gallant "Anglais" in khaki had so swiftly driven out.

Naturally, much distressed at the news of her brother's murder, the Baronne entered the place with fixed, terror-stricken eyes, that same set expression of woe and hopelessness which was seen everywhere in Belgium, now that the gallant little kingdom had fallen beneath the fire and sword of a relentless barbarian.

On every hand great holes showed in the walls, torn open by the British shells, many houses were completely demolished, and in some places only rubble heaps remained to show the site where houses had stood. In others, walls stood gaunt and blackened where the fire had gutted them, causing roofs and windows to fall in.

Wandering pigs were grunting in the long street, and big-eyed little children, now that the roar of war had ceased, were playing merrily among the ruins and finding all sorts of oddments half burned in the debris. One, evidently a humorist, had put on the spiked helmet of a dead German, and was striking comic attitudes, to the delight of his playfellows. His head being completely buried in the canvas-covered helmet, he presented a most ludicrous appearance.

"Let us find M'sieur Labarre, mother," suggested Aimée, for she knew the place well, as they had often been her uncle's guests at the now ruined château.

"Yes," murmured the Baronne. "I feel so very faint, dear, that I really can go no further!" And, indeed, the poor woman, refined and cultured, having tramped all through that terrible night in her thin

shoes, and having been challenged so constantly by soldiers in the darkness—each challenge being a fright lest it be that of the enemy—she was entirely exhausted and unnerved.

Labarre was a farmer, who held some land belonging to Aimée's uncle, and it was not long before they entered his modest house—a long, ugly, grey-slatted place surrounded by haystacks and out-houses.

Labarre, a stout, ruddy-faced man, of middle age, in a blue linen blouse, typical of the Walloon farmer, welcomed the poor ladies warmly and in great surprise, and soon they were in the hands of his stout wife, Elise, and were drinking cups of hot *bouillon*, for, in the farms of the Ardennes, the stock-pot is usually simmering upon the fire.

The long, old-fashioned room, with its heavy beams, its stone-paving, its row of copper cooking utensils shining in the sun, and its wide chimney and wooden chairs was, indeed, a haven of rest after the terrors of that night.

And while they drank the *bouillon*, the fat farmer lifted his hands as he told them the story of the German occupation.

"Ah! Baronne! It was terrible—very terrible," he cried in his Walloon dialect. "Those pigs of Germans came here, took all the corn I had, smashed my piano and thieved two of my horses. But the brave English drove them out. We fled when the English shells began to fall, but, fortunately, not one did any damage to our house, though the big barn was set on fire with two haystacks, and destroyed."

Having remained under the farmer's hospitable

roof for a day, Aimée, who had now completely recovered, resolved to leave her mother in Madame Labarre's charge, and endeavour to reach Dinant where, it was said, the telephone with Brussels had been repaired. By that means she could, she hoped, communicate with her father, and ascertain what they should do.

The British soldiers in khaki were now in possession of Bourseigne, and that communication was open from Dinant to Brussels, Aimée had learnt from a lieutenant of the Gloucesters, a good-looking young fellow named Dick Fortescue, whom she had met in the little Place having some trouble with the Walloon language in a purchase of fodder he was making, and had offered to interpret.

What Fortescue had told her caused her to decide, therefore, two hours later, there being no trains nor any conveyance available, she set out alone, a slim, pathetic little figure in dusty black, wearing a black shawl borrowed from the farmer's wife, and turned her face westward along that white road so familiar to her, a highway which ran over green hills and along deep valleys, and which was the main road over which the lumbering, old-fashioned post *diligences*, with their jingling bells, still passed, in peace time, between Sedan and Dinant.

With her face to the deep glow of the sunset she trudged forward, her thoughts reverting, as they always did, to Edmond—her Edmond!

"Where is he?" she murmured, as her white, hard-set lips moved. "What can have happened to him?"

Was he lying still and dead—buried perhaps in a nameless grave—or was he still fighting valiantly in defence of his country and his King?

If he were, he would, wherever he might be, still be thinking of her. Of that she was confident, for they loved each other with a firm, all-absorbing and eternal love, a love that could never be shaken, and that could never die.

The light of the fading day darkened into the blood-red afterglow, and before her there rose the lowering clouds of night, as alone and unprotected she still bent forward, with sixteen miles to cover ere she reached the narrow, cobbled streets of Dinant. Ten miles away on her left stood S  v  rac, now, alas ! but a smouldering ruin, and over in that direction she could hear the distant booming of heavy guns, for that evening the British, acquitting themselves so bravely, were fighting Von Kluck all along the line from Mons, through Charleroi, to near M  z  res. They were stemming the German invasion, and while the flower of the German Army was being hurled against them, they swept them off even though the Kaiser, in his insane arrogance, had issued as his "Imperial command" that General French's "contemptible little army" should be crushed out of existence.

In her torn and dusty black gown, and patent leather shoes, worn badly down by the long tramp from S  v  rac, Aim  e, though weary and footsore, did not lose heart. She was gratified that her mother was in a place of safety, and now, if she could only communicate with her father, they would, no doubt, be able to get to Ostend, and perhaps over to England. So she went forward with the distant rumble of artillery ever in her ears, while as darkness fell, she turned aside to notice a fierce red glare in the sky far away across the Meuse, in the direction of Philippeville.

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Over there another town had no doubt been given to the flames.

At the village of Malvoisin she met several thousands of refugees coming towards France, raising clouds of suffocating dust. They were peasants driven by the enemy out of the peaceful valley of the winding Ourthe, and were hoping to find shelter across the frontier in France. Now and then there passed clattering squadrons of Belgian cavalry, the little yellow tassels hanging gaily from the front of their caps, while ever and anon there lumbered past, in the dim light, great grey-painted siege-guns, long trains of ammunition-wagons, red-cross motor-ambulances, and endless lines of transports of all sorts.

Squads of infantry marched gaily to martial airs, or the men sang the latest popular songs of the *café-chantant*, while there also passed several machine-guns drawn by their dog-teams.

Presently Aimée joined three tearful, homeless women, one of whom trundled an old rickety perambulator filled with her household goods. They had come from Rossignol, forty miles distant, which had been sacked and burned by a Uhlan patrol, and they described to her the terrible scene. Therefore, in company, the trio pushed forward until at length they entered a long dark street of shattered houses, which Aimée recognised, to her amazement, as that of Anseremme. Yes! There was the little Hôtel Beau Séjour where she and Edmond had spent so many sunny hours in secret together, but alas! its walls were now gaunt and roofless. It had been gutted by fire, while the pleasant little *terrasse* beside the river was heaped with the debris of fallen walls.

She sighed as she passed the place which held for her so many fond memories, and again pressed forward with blistered feet, on past that great high split rock, through which the road runs beside the river, known as the Roche Bayard, until at length she found herself in the long dark street of half-ruined houses that led straight into the little Place at Dinant.

Arrived there, she halted aghast. The long bridge had fallen, a wreck, into the river, and there were signs everywhere of the ruthless bombardment a week before, when happily the Germans had been driven out and had retired. But at that hour, about half-past ten o'clock, the place was as silent as the grave. Everywhere was ruin and desolation, while in the air was still the pungent odour of burnt wood, the woodwork of houses set on fire by the German shells.

There being neither gas nor electricity, an oil lamp had been hung upon a nail on a wall, and it was near this that the girl was standing. She was well known in Dinant as daughter of the Baron who held the purse-strings of Belgium, and, with her mother, frequently came to the little town in their car.

She stood hesitating as to whom she should ask a favour and allow her to telephone to Brussels, when she was suddenly startled by a familiar voice behind her, and holding her breath, she faced the man who had addressed her.

It was a Belgian soldier.

It was Edmond Valentin !

CHAPTER XIII

BEFORE THE STORM

"*AIMÉE !*" he gasped. "*You !*"

"*Dieu !* Edmond. You !—fancy you here, just at the moment when——"

"When—what ?" he echoed. "Tell me, why are you here—in this place ? Why are you not in Brussels ? It is not safe for you here, my darling !"

And he placed his hand tenderly upon her shoulder and, in the dim light of the lantern, looked straight into her dear face.

She gazed at him. He was in his heavy military overcoat, with a rifle slung upon his shoulder, for he had come down into the town from the fortress above, where his machine-gun was posted, in order to take a message from his captain to the captain of infantry holding the head of the wrecked bridge close by.

A few brief, hasty words sufficed to explain the terrible scene at Sévérac ; how she and her mother had fled, and the reason of her long tramp to Dinant. There, in that dark, silent little square before the ruined church, with the high ruined old fortress on the cliff above, he drew her weary head down upon his breast, imprinting upon her white brow a long, passionate kiss, and murmuring :

"Ah ! my darling, I have prayed to God that I

might be spared to see you once again—if only just once—for the last time ! ”

“ No, no,” she cried, lifting her lips to his, and kissing him long and fervently. “ No. We shall win, Edmond, and you will live. Right and justice are, surely, upon our side, and we shall vanquish this German enemy of civilisation. Brute force can never win in the face of Providence and God’s goodwill.”

“ True, darling. But you must save yourself,” he urged. And, hastily, he told her of the attack upon Liège, the retreat to the Meuse, the bombardment of Dinant, and the valiant manner in which the defenders had fought and retaken the citadel.

In those five minutes in which the devoted pair stood together in the dim, flickering light, he held her in his strong embrace. Their affection was a fierce and passionate devotion, the fire of a love unquenchable. He repeated in her ear his fervent love for her, and then he added in a hard voice :

“ Aimée, if in this terrible fight for life I fall, and we do not meet again, I want you to promise me one thing. Will you, darling ? ”

“ Of course, Edmond. What is it ? ”

“ That you will never consent to marry that man, Arnaud Rigaux—our enemy ? ”

“ I will never marry him, Edmond. I would rather die first ! ”

“ You promise me that ? ” he asked eagerly.

“ I promise you. Before I consent I would rather take my own life. I swear to you that I will never be the wife of Arnaud Rigaux.”

"*Bien!* Remember always that he is our mutual enemy—yours and mine," he said in a hard, determined tone. Then he again kissed her, reassured by her fervent promise.

As they stood beneath the lamplight, a sentry passed them, his bayonet gleaming beneath the fitful light. But they were both in ignorance that, away in the shadow of a doorway, a man who had just entered the square had withdrawn to watch the affectionate pair—out of curiosity perhaps.

Lovers are always interesting to the curious, yet this man who had hitherto walked very briskly, had suddenly stopped and withdrawn to the shadow, so suddenly indeed, that the heavy-footed sentry had not detected his light steps.

Had Edmond Valentin known that he was being spied upon, then woe-betide the watcher! The Belgians were again in occupation of the town, and any suspicious character was at once arrested as a German spy, of whom there were so many hundreds swarming all over the country.

As it was, the pair stood in utter ignorance of the sharp watchful eyes upon them, and in the silence of the night, continued in low undertones their assurances of affection. .

Away across the river—beyond the ruins of the old Château of Crève-Cœur—a fierce red light rose until it glared in the night sky, the toll of war paid by the poor defenceless peasantry, to those barbaric hordes of "kultur" who were sweeping across Belgium with rapine, fire, and sword. At no crime or outrage, torture or desecration, were those hirelings of the

Master Criminal of Earth now hesitating. The modern Judas, who had stretched out the hand of friendship to Great Britain, to Russia, to France and to Belgium, falsely proclaiming himself the Apostle of Peace, and endeavouring to blind the world to his true intentions, had now revealed himself as the world's bitterest, most dastardly, and most low-down enemy, who was making what he was pleased to term "frightful examples" in an endeavour to terrify and to stagger humanity.

"I fear that you will not be able to telephone to your father, darling," Edmond was saying. "Only an hour ago communication was again interrupted. Some Uhlans have cut the wires, I suppose. They do so every day. Your only chance will be to try and get through to Brussels yourself—only it is so far away, now that there is no rail or motors—sixty mules, or more."

"But what shall I do?" she asked. "What do you advise, Edmond?"

What could he advise? He stood before her, unable to reply.

So engrossed were they in their conversation that they did not notice that, after the sentry had passed across the square to the corner of the narrow Rue Grande, up which Aimée had trudged, the dark civilian figure in the doorway had slipped across the Grand Place, and was again engulfed in the shadows.

"You can go no further to-night, dearest," he said. "You know this place—Dinant. Why not go to the Hôtel de l'Épée yonder, up the street, and remain there till morning? Then I will get permission to

come and see you, and we can decide upon 'sor plan."

"Ah! yes!" she cried. "Uncle François! I know the dear old fellow. His son was in our service as chauffeur two years ago. What an excellent idea! Yes. I will go at once. But without money will he take me in?" she queried with hesitancy.

"Never fear, darling!" he laughed. "The daughter of the Baron de Neuville has unlimited credit in any town in Belgium. But alas!" he added, "I must go, sweetheart, for I have to deliver an immediate message, and obtain a reply. I may be too late if I do not hurry."

"Yes—go, Edmond," she said, just a little reluctantly. "Carry out your duty. I know my way to Uncle François' quite well. *Au revoir!*"

"Till to-morrow, my own darling," he said, and holding her again in his strong embrace for a few seconds, he imprinted upon her white, open brow, fond passionate caresses in all the ecstasy of their mutual love.

As he held her in his arms, in the dark silent Grand Place, the sharp sound of a bugle broke upon their ears. It was blown from the citadel above.

"The alarm!" gasped her lover breathlessly. "*Dieu!* What can have happened?" In a moment the call was repeated, and echoed across the river, while next second there was the rattle of rifle-shots in the darkness, and from the rock, above where they stood, opened out long white beams of intense light which slowly swept the valley up and down.

Suddenly the quick pom-pom-pom of a Maxim—

Edmond's Maxim—broke the quiet, followed by a bright flash and a terrific explosion above them.

The Belgians had discovered that the enemy, under cover of darkness, were making another attack upon the town !

"You cannot stay here, darling," Edmond cried, in frantic haste. "Run along to Uncle François'. He has big cellars there. Remain below in them until the storm has passed. I must get back to my gun." And he kissed her again breathlessly, saying, "Good-bye, darling—till to-morrow."

Once more the heavy guns upon the citadel flashed and roared. No time was now to be lost.

"We are attacked again ! " cried Valentin. "Run along to the Epée ! You will be safe there. Run quickly"—and he kissed her in hasty farewell. Then they parted.

She had only a couple of hundred yards to go to gain the old-fashioned inn. He watched her disappear around the corner, then, as fast as his legs could carry him, he ascended the hill-side to where his men, posted with their machine-gun, were already firing.

By this time, however, the whole town was agog. The alarm signals had aroused everyone. It was, indeed, an awful nightmare. The barbaric enemy were again upon them for a second time !

A German armoured motor-car had suddenly swept down the Rue St. Jacques—which ran behind the Rue Grande—and was firing with its machine-gun into the windows of houses without warning or provocation.

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Behind it, rode a large body of Uhlans, who at once ran through, with their lances, those of the peaceful inhabitants who opened their doors to ascertain the cause of the firing.

Aimée succeeded in gaining the door of the ancient inn only just in time, knocking frantically, and obtaining admittance, while Uncle François, recognising her, was at once eager for information as to what had happened to the Baron. At the moment the girl entered the shelter of the house, bullets were already sweeping up the streets.

Dinant had been attacked suddenly by a force under Lieutenant-Colonel Beege, one of the most arrogant Huns of the Kaiser—a monster, who dealt death upon defenceless women and children, and who had been sent by his superiors to repeat the “frightful examples” of Aerschot and of Visé. The sharp, relentless talons of the Prussian eagle had, alas! been set into the little place, peaceful, quiet, and unoffending as it had always been throughout the ages.

Within five minutes the town arose from its silence to a pandemonium of noise. Edmond, who had climbed up the four hundred steps leading to the citadel to his machine-gun, saw but little of the Dantean scene below. His pom-pom was now spitting death down into the Grand Place, but suddenly he slackened the fire in fear lest he might be sending to the grave any of those brave Dinantais, whom he could not distinguish from the enemy in the darkness.

Meanwhile, Aimée stood in the great cellars of the Hotel of the Sword, huddled with a hundred others of

all ages and all classes, and fearing for her lover in that violent storm which had so suddenly burst upon them.

How would it end ? What could the end be ?

CHAPTER XIV

HELD BY THE ENEMY

THE long, narrow street was being swept by a hail of lead. Once again was Dinant stricken.

The Germans—ordered by the assassin who led them—were firing indiscriminately into the houses as they rode along.

A woman sleeping in the top room of the hotel was killed, while, in the next house, a poor little child was mortally wounded, and died in its mother's arms. Those who opened their doors, startled at the commotion, were all ruthlessly shot down. The marauders, more savage than the warriors of the Khalifa, spared nobody.

Aimée, seated upon a mouldy wine-barrel in the stuffy cellar amid that crowd of terrified women, listened to the firing, keenly apprehensive of Edmond's fate. That sudden and unexpected meeting now seemed to her like some strange dream.

Hiding there, she knew not the savage, awful acts that were being committed by the Kaiser's assassins, acts which were but the prelude of a reign of terror.

"Do not be distressed, Mademoiselle," urged old

Uncle François, placing his big, heavy hand kindly upon the girl's shoulder. "You are safe here, and besides, our soldiers will soon drive out the enemy, as they did before."

As he spoke, the earth shook beneath the roar of a big field-gun.

"Hark! They are firing upon them from the citadel!" he added.

That night proved one of breathless suspense. The sound of intermittent firing could be heard, even down in that vaulted cellar, together with the heavier explosions which, ever and anon, shook the ancient place to its very foundations.

Uncle François and his daughter busied themselves in making coffee for the refugees, poor, frantic women, who dreaded what fate might befall their husbands and brothers. Many of them knelt piously and aloud besought the protection of the Almighty against the barbarians.

Dawn came at last, and with it large masses of German troops swept into the town. Some sharp fighting had occurred along the heights above the Meuse, but during the night the gallant defenders had been driven out of the town, being compelled to fall back along the wide valley towards Namur.

Edmond Valentia worked his gun valiantly, with a fierce, dogged determination not to leave Aimée in the hands of the brutal soldiery.

But it was all to no purpose. The order was given to retire, and he was compelled to withdraw with his comrades under cover of darkness.

"The pigs shall die!" he muttered fiercely to himself. He clenched his teeth, and, even after the

order to "cease fire," he still worked his Maxim, mowing down a squad of twenty or so German infantrymen who had just entered the Place below, at the spot where he and Aimée had stood together only a short time before.

Aimée was down there, in that stricken town ! Could he thus abandon her to her fate !

He blamed himself for advising her to go to the house of Uncle François. She should have kept on the road towards Namur, for had she done so, she would have now been beyond the danger zone

A shrapnel bullet had grazed his left wrist, and around it he had hastily wrapped a piece of dirty rag, which was now already saturated with blood. But in his chagrin at their compulsory retreat, he heeded not his injury. The welfare of the sweet girl, whom he loved more dearly than his own life, was his only thought.

His brigade, thus driven from their position, withdrew in the darkness over the hills to behind the village of Houx, where the long railway-bridge crossing the Meuse, destroyed a few days ago by the defenders, was now lying a wreck of twisted ironwork in the stream. There they took up a second defensive position.

But meanwhile in Dinant the Germans, filled with the blood-lust of triumph, and urged on by their cultured "darlings" of Berlin drawing-rooms—those degenerate elegants who were receiving tin crosses from their Kaiser because of the "frightful examples" they were making—were now committing atrocities more abominable even than those once committed in

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Bulgaria, and denounced by the whole civilised world.

Into the big, ill-lit cellar descended a terrified woman who told an awful story. German soldiers were smashing in the doors of every house, and murdering everybody found within.

"My poor husband has just been killed before my very eyes!" shrieked the poor, half-demented creature. "My two children also! The brutes! They stabbed them with their bayonets! I flew, and they did not catch me. They are arresting all women, and taking them up to the Monastery. They will be here soon."

"Here!" gasped Aimée, her face suddenly white as death. "Surely they will not come here!" she cried.

"They will!" shouted the frantic, half-crazed woman, who had seen her beloved husband fall beneath the bullets of the soldiers ere they, laughingly, set fire to her house. "They will!"

Scarcely had she spoken before a young man, Pierre Fiévet, a nephew of Uncle François, limped down the broken steps into the cellar, wounded in the foot, and, calling the old man aside, said in a low voice in his native Walloon dialect:

"Don't alarm the women. But the situation outside is fearful." He was a young doctor, and well known in Dinant. "About sixty workmen at the cotton-mill, together with our friend Himmer, the manager, have just been found in hiding under a culvert," he added. "They have all been shot—everyone of them. The soldiers are using bombs to

set fire to the houses everywhere. It is a raging furnace outside ! ”

“ *Dieu !* ” gasped the old man. “ What shall we do ? ”

“ Heaven help us ! I do not know,” replied the young doctor. “ I only just managed to escape with my life. I saw, only a minute or two ago, in the Place d’Armes, quite two hundred men and boys—old men of seventy-five and boys of twelve, many of whom I knew—drawn up, and then shot down by a machine-gun. Père Jules, our old friend, was among them—and surely he was fully eighty ! ”

“ Holy Jesu ! May God place His curse upon these Germans ! ” cried the old fellow fervently. “ As surely as there is a God in heaven, so assuredly shall we be avenged by a Hand which is stronger and more relentless than the Kaiser’s in wreaking vengeance. What else do you know ? ” he inquired eagerly.

“ Xavier Wasseige, manager of the Banque de la Meuse, has been shot, together with his two sons, and Camille Fisette and his little boy of twelve have also been murdered. They are wiping out the whole district of Saint Médart, between the station and the bridge. All is in flames. The soldiers are worse than African savages. The new post-office has been burnt and blown up. It is only a heap of ruins.”

Uncle François knit his grey brows, and gazed steadily into his nephew’s eyes.

“ Look here ! Are you lying, Pierre ? ” he asked. “ Have you really seen all this ? ”

“ Yes. I have seen it with my own eyes.”

"I don't believe you," declared the old man bluntly. "I will go out and see for myself what these German fiends are doing."

"Oh! In the name of God, don't!" cried his nephew in quick apprehension. "You will certainly be killed. The whole of the Rue Sax, along by the river bank, is burning. Not a single house has escaped. They intend, it seems, to destroy all our town, on both sides of the river, now that they have repaired their pontoon. Think that we have lived in Dinant to witness this!"

"But what shall we do?" gasped the poor old fellow. "How can we save these poor women?"

His words were overheard by Aimée, who rose quickly and came forward, asking:

"What has happened?" and, indicating the young man, she asked, "What has this gentleman been telling you?"

"Oh—well—nothing very important, Mademoiselle," François answered with hesitation. "This is Doctor Pierre Flévet, my nephew, and he has just brought me a message. There is no real danger, Mademoiselle," he assured her. "Our splendid troops are still close by, and will drive the invaders out, as before. The brigand, Von Emmuch, will meet his deserts before long, depend upon it, my dear Mademoiselle."

The girl, thus assured, withdrew to allow the two men to continue their conversation, which she believed to be of a private character.

"Don't alarm these women, Pierre," whispered old François. "Poor creatures, they are suffering enough already."

"But what will you do? What can you do? At any moment they may burn down this place—and you will all be suffocated like rats in a hole."

"And, surely, that will be a far better fate for the women, than if the soldiers seize them," was the old man's hard response. "I, and your cousin Marie, will die with them here—if it is necessary. I, for one, am not afraid to die. I have made my peace with God. I am too old and feeble to handle a rifle, but when I was young I was a soldier of Belgium. Our little country has shown the world that she can fight. If the great wave of Germany sweeps further upon us we must necessarily be crushed out of existence. But the Powers, France, England, and Russia, will see that our memory—our grave—is avenged. I still believe, Pierre, in our country, and in our good King Albert!"

"Forty men over at the brewery of Nicaise Frères, who were found in the cellars an hour ago, were brought out and shot," the young man said. "But ah! *mon oncle*, you should have witnessed the scene in the Place d'Armes—how they placed our poor, innocent townspeople against the wall—ranging them in rows, under pretence that the German Colonel was to address them. A miserable spy, who spoke Walloon as fluently as I do myself, shouted that Colonel Beeger wished to speak to them, and to urge them to bow to the inevitable, and become German subjects. They were all attention, ready to listen, and little dreaming the awful fate in store for them. They never foresaw the German treachery until a little grey machine-gun at the corner, with the four men behind it, suddenly rattled out, and in a few moments the

whole of them were wallowing in their own life-blood. Ah ! it was fearful, cruel, inhuman—*ghastly* ! And this is in our civilised age ! ”

“ Pierre,” exclaimed the good-natured old fellow softly, so that the women in that dank Dantesque vault should not overhear. “ Our God is the God of justice and of righteousness. These murderers may wreck and desecrate our churches ; they may kill our dear devoted priests ; they may ridicule our religion, yet the great God who watches over us will, most assuredly, grind in His mill the arrogant nation that has sought to crush the world beneath Prussian despotism. We may die to-day in our good cause, but the Kaiser to-morrow will be hurled down and die accursed by humanity, and damned to hell by his Creator ! ”

“ True, our poor people are falling beneath German bullets—though they have committed no offence against the German nation—yet what can you do here ? You seem to be caught in a trap. What shall you do with these women ? ”

“ Heaven knows ! ” gasped the honest old fellow. “ What can I do ? What do you suggest ? ” and he wrung his hands.

At that moment a white-haired old man, nearly eighty years of age, staggered down the broken steps, shrieking :

“ Ah ! Let me die ! Let me die ! The brutes are shooting men and boys in the Place, and now the soldiers are here—to *kill us all* ! ”

A terrible panic ensued at those significant words. The women huddled together, shrieked and screamed, for there, sure enough, came down the stone steps

a grey-coated German soldier in spiked 'canvas-covered helmet, shouting roughly some command in German, and carrying his gleaming bayonet fixed before him.

"You women must all come up out of here!" cried a stern voice in bad French, as several other soldiers followed the first who had descended, until a dozen stood in the cellar.

The poor frightened creatures shrieked, wailed, and prayed for protection.

But the brutal soldiers, led by a swaggering young lieutenant of the Brandenburg infantry, were obdurate and commenced to roughly ill-treat the women, and cuff them towards the steps.

Uncle François raised his voice in loud protest, but next second a shot rang sharply out, and he fell dead upon the stones, a bullet through his heart, while the brute who had shot him roughly kicked his body aside with a German oath.

Such an action cowed them all.

A silence fell—the grim, terrible silence of those caught in a death-trap, for the women were now held by the enemy, and they knew, alas! too well, what their fate would now be—either dishonour or death.

CHAPTER XV

BETRAYS THE TRAITOR

THE few moments that followed were indeed full of grim horror.

An old peasant woman, standing by Aimée, in her frenzy, spat at one of the German soldiers, whereupon he struck her in the breast with his bayonet, and, with a piercing shriek, the poor thing fell, her thin, bony hands clutching at the stones in her death agony.

"Come! no loitering!" shouted the young officer brutally, in French. "We must have you cellar-rats out above ground." Then, catching sight of Aimée, he approached her, and spoke some words in German. She knew the language well, but did not reply, pretending that she did not understand.

At that moment there was a struggle on the stone stairway, which was narrow and winding, and his attention became diverted from her, whereupon the big, grey-coated infantryman, who had shot poor Uncle François, strode up to her and leered in her face.

She turned her head.

He placed his heavy hand upon her shoulder, saying, in his bad French:

"My girl, you are young and very pretty—to be sure!"

And then she saw, by his flushed face and bright eyes, that he had been drinking. The Germans

drank up whatever they could loot—spirits, wine, beer, liqueurs, *aperatifs*—all the contents of the cafés.

The girl, though defenceless, drew herself up quickly, and replied in German, with the words :

“ I see no reason why you should insult me ! ”

“ Insult ! ” he laughed roughly. “ Ah, you will see. We shall teach you rats, who live down here in holes, a lesson. Get along—and quickly.”

And he prodded her with his bayonet towards where the others, driven like sheep, were stumbling up the dark, slippery steps of the ancient vault.

She went forward without a murmur. The fate of the others was to be hers also.

Where was Edmond ? If he were there he would certainly teach those brutes a severe lesson. But alas ! he was not there. The Belgians had been driven out, and they, weak and defenceless, were held by a fierce relentless set of savages. The whole world was now learning the vanity of attempting to distinguish between the Germany of “ culture ” and the panoplied brutality of Prussian arrogance.

With the others, Aimée had ascended the steps and had gained the big ancient kitchen of the inn.

A number of the elder women had been pushed forward out into the street, where some screamed in sudden madness at seeing the bodies of men lying in the roadway. But Aimée, with half a dozen or so of the younger women, were detained by the officer, who had just given a sharp order to his men.

Suddenly the young elegant in command went outside, leaving the women to suffer the indignities of a dozen or so soldiers left to guard them. The

big infantryman again approached Aimée, but she would speak no further word.

Suddenly, in the doorway, there appeared the figure of a major, at whose word the men quickly drew up to attention.

Aimée looked at him, scarce believing her own eyes. Was she dreaming ?

She stood staring at him. Though his uniform was strange, his face was only too familiar.

It was Arnaud Rigaux.

"M'sieur Rigaux ! *You !*" she gasped. "*You—a German !*"

"Yes, Mademoiselle," he laughed. "I have been searching everywhere for you. It is indeed fortunate that I am here in time. This, surely, is no place for you."

"Searching for me ?" she echoed. "How did you know I was here—in Dinant ? And, tell me—why are you, a Belgian—wearing the Prussian uniform ?"

Truly the meeting was a dramatic one.

He laughed lightly, replying hastily :

"My dear Aimée, I will explain all that later. Come. Get away with me, while there is yet time." Then, whispering in her ear, he added : "These men are mostly drunk. Quick ! Come with me, and I will place you in safety."

"But I cannot understand," the girl cried, still in hesitation. "Why are you here—with the enemy, and in the enemy's uniform ?"

"This is surely no time for questions or explanations," he urged. And, turning to the soldiers, he gave an order to march the remaining women out of

the house. "Let me save you, Aimée," he added in French, turning to her.

"How? How can you save me?" she inquired, instinctively mistrusting him. The very fact that he was dressed as a German officer had aroused grave suspicion in her mind.

"I have my car in waiting, away beyond the German lines. Come with me. Don't hesitate. Trust yourself in my care, I beg of you, Mademoiselle."

"I want to get to my father," she said, still hesitating.

"He is in Brussels. I will take you to him—on one condition," and he placed his hand upon her arm and looked earnestly into her pale, agitated countenance.

"What condition?" she inquired, starting quickly at his touch. He made conditions, even in that hour of direst peril! Dinant was aflame, and hundreds of innocent people were now being murdered by the Kaiser's Huns.

"The condition, Aimée," he said, looking straight into her eyes very seriously, "is that you will become my wife."

"Your wife, M'sieur Rigaux—*never!*"

"You refuse!" he cried, a brutal note in his hard voice. "You refuse, Mademoiselle," he added threateningly—"and so you prefer to remain here, in the hands of the soldiery. They will have but little respect for the daughter of the Baron de Neuville, I assure you."

She turned upon him fiercely, like a tigress, retorting:

"Those men, assassins as they have proved themselves to be, will have just as much respect for me as you yourself have—you, a traitor who, though a Belgian, are now wearing a Prussian uniform!"

The man laughed in her face, and she saw in his countenance a fierce, fiendish, even terrible expression such as she had never seen there before. Gradually it was beginning to dawn upon her that this man who could move backwards and forwards through the opposing lines, dressed as a German officer, must be a spy.

"Very well," he said. "If you so desire, I will leave you to your fate—the wretched fate of those women who have just been driven out from here. The enemy has set his hand heavily upon you at last," he laughed. "And you Belgians may expect neither pity nor respect."

"Ah, then I know you!" she cried. "You are not Belgian—but German—you, who have posed so long as my father's intimate friend—you, who thought to mislead us—who schemed to bring the enemy into our midst. Though you have uttered words of love to me, I see you now, exposed as a spy—as an enemy—as one who should be tried and shot as a traitor!"

She did not spare her words in the mad frenzy of the moment.

"You speak harshly," he growled. "If you do not have a care, you shall pay for this!"

"I will. I would rather die here now, than become the wife of a low, cunning spy, who has posed as one of ourselves while he has been in secret relation with the enemy all the time. I hate you, Arnaud

Rigaux—*I hate you!*” shrieked the girl. “Do your worst to me! The worst cannot be worse than death—and even that I prefer, to further association with one who wears the Prussian uniform, and who is leading the enemy into our country. Your cultured friends have burned and sacked Sévérac. Let them sack the whole of Belgium if they will, but our men have still the spirit to defend themselves, just as I have to-day. I defy you, clever, cunning spy that you are. Hear me!” she cried, her white teeth set, her head low upon her shoulders, and her hands clenched as she stood before him, half crouched as a hunted animal ready to spring. “You men who make war upon women may try and crush us, but you will never crush me. Go, and escape in your car if you will. Pass through the Belgian lines back to Brussels. But, though only a defenceless girl, I am safer even in the hands of this barbarian enemy than in the hands of a traitor like you!”

“Very well, girl—choose your own fate,” laughed the man roughly. “You refuse to go with me—eh?”

“Yes,” she said. “I refuse. I hate the sight of your treacherous face. Already I have told my father so.”

“Your father is no longer a person to be regarded,” the man declared. “He is already ruined financially. I have seen to that, never fear. You are no longer the daughter of Baron de Neuville, but the daughter of a man whom this war has brought to ruin and to bankruptcy. It should be an honour to you, daughter of a ruined man, that I should offer you marriage.”

“I am engaged to marry Edmond Valentin,” she replied,

"Bah! a mere soldier. If he is not already dead he soon will be. Germany fluffs away the Belgian army like so many grains of sawdust before the wind."

"No. Edmond is honest and just. He will live," she cried. "And you, the spy and traitor, will die an ignoble death!"

"Well," he laughed defiantly. "We shall see all about that, Mademoiselle. We have been long preparing for this *coup*—for the destruction of your snug little kingdom, and now we are here we shall follow Bismarck's plan, and not leave your country even their eyes to weep with. It will be swept from end to end—and swept still again and again, until it is Belgian no longer, but German—part of the world-empire of our great Kaiser."

The fellow did not further disguise that he was a German agent—he who had posed as a patriotic Belgian, was there in Dinant, dressed in Prussian uniform.

The trembling girl stood amazed. The ghastly truth was, to her, one horrible, awful nightmare.

"Your great Kaiser, as you call him, does not intimidate me," she replied boldly. "Go, Arnaud Rigaux, and leave me to my fate, whatever you decide it to be. I will never accept the friendly offices of a man who is a traitor and a spy."

Rigaux bit his lip. Those were the hardest words that had ever been spoken to him. He had been on a mission into the German lines, and only by pure chance had he recognised her with Valentin, standing in the Place on the previous night.

His cunning brain was already working out a swift yet subtle revenge. Aimée had attracted him,

and he had marked her down as his victim by fair means or by foul. But her defiance had now upset all his calculations. To his surprise she preferred death itself, to the renunciation of her vow to Edmond Valentin.

He hesitated. He held her in his relentless hands. That she knew. Death was to be her fate, and she stood, with pale face, bold and defiant—prepared to meet it.

CHAPTER XVI

THE FIRE OF FATE

OUTSIDE in the streets could be heard the sound of rifle-fire, while the air was filled with the pungent odour of powder, and of burning wood.

The whole town had, by that time, become a veritable hell. Not far along the street, indeed in sight of the Hotel of the Sword, forty or so innocent men—honest workers at a neighbouring factory—had been drawn up against a wall. The front row was ordered to kneel, with their hands up, the others remaining standing behind them. A platoon of soldiers suddenly drew up in face of these unhappy men, with their rifles ready. In vain did the frantic women beg for mercy for their sons, husbands, and brothers. But the officer, grinning, ordered his men to fire. Some fell forward, dead, others were only slightly wounded. But the soldiers, to make sure, fired three volleys into that heap of men in their death throes. Such

fell, hellish work had been ordered "as examples" by the glittering War Lord—the man who declared that God was his guide in his arrogant desire to rule the world. Those poor fellows were, even while their bodies were still warm, thrown into a pit dug in a neighbouring garden.

Further up the same street, a poor old paralytic was shot in his invalid-chair, together with a bright little boy of twelve, and their bodies were kicked aside into a doorway, while, at the same time, a man of sixty-five, his wife, his son and his daughter, were set up against the wall of their burning house and shot. And none of them had committed any crime!

Here and there were loud explosions. The soldiers, who had pillaged the cafés and drunk indiscriminately all they could find, were blowing open the safes of merchants and shopkeepers with dynamite, and stealing all they could discover. They were mere brigands.

The Faubourg de Leffe, near the broken viaduct of the railway, was already in flames. Soldiers were using their inflammable confetti provided them by the Fatherland, which they were sprinkling everywhere, for the monster in command had given the order that Dinant, after being sacked, and its people massacred, should be burnt.

As the slim, pale-faced girl stood facing her father's false friend, she could hear the wild shrieks of the defenceless women outside—those poor creatures dragged forth to witness the heartless murder of those dearest to them.

"Well," Rigaux asked again, with an evil grin

upon his face. "So you are quite 'decided—eh ?"

"I am quite decided, m'sieur, that you are my bitterest enemy," was her hard, defiant answer. "I have been caught here, helpless. But I have no hope, therefore I have no fear. To whatever fate you, as spy of the accursed Kaiser of Germany, may condemn me, I am quite prepared."

For a few seconds he remained silent. Her coolness and bold defiance, in face of that awful scene, absolutely staggered him. He never credited her with such nerve.

"But will you not accept my offer, and escape with me ?"

"No. I will not accept the assistance of one who has openly confessed himself to be a traitor," she responded.

"But you cannot remain here—you will be killed—perhaps even meet with a worse fate. You do not know what awful scenes are in progress in Dinant at this moment," he said. "The soldiers are collecting up the people, men, women, and children, and mowing them down with their machine-guns. You cannot remain here while this awful work of destruction, theft, and incendiarism is in progress !"

"And whose work, pray, is this ? It is men such as you who are responsible—men who have sold Belgium into her enemy's hands," she cried bitterly, her big eyes *glaring* at him in her woman's undisguised hatred.

"Merely the fortunes of war, Mademoiselle," he replied with a smile, as he shrugged his shoulders, quite unperturbed by her violent denunciation.

"Then go, and leave me to face this terrible fate to which I have been consigned. Shoot me with that revolver I see you have in your belt," she cried wildly. "Shoot me, if you will. I am quite ready."

But he grinned horribly in her face—the grin of a man who intended a demoniacal revenge.

She knew herself to be defenceless—utterly helpless in his hands. Men and women of Dinant, known to her from childhood, lay stiffening in death in that narrow street wherein hell had been let loose by the orders of the arrogant War Lord—that punchbeck Napoleon who dangled his tin crosses before his troops to incite them to deeds of barbarism, which were afterwards magnified and distorted into those of valour.

"No," the man laughed. "If you, as daughter of the Baron de Neuville, still disregard my well-meant efforts to rescue you from this awful abyss of dishonour and death, then I have no more to say. I can only leave you to the same fate as that of the women of the town."

"No!" shrieked the girl. "Shoot me." And she stood before him ready to fall beneath the bullet of his revolver. "Shoot me—have mercy upon me and *shoot me!*"

She felt his hot, foetid breath once again upon her cheek; she heard the report of the rifles outside, the loud, piercing shrieks of defenceless women, the exultant shouts and laughter of the Germans, and the rapid crackling of a machine-gun in the immediate vicinity.

She struggled violently to free herself, but he was

the stronger. His sensuous lips were upon hers, his big eyes looked fiercely into hers, while her slim figure was held within his strong, desperate grasp. She saw the evil, wicked look in his eyes.

\ “Let me go, you brute—you spy of Germany!” she shrieked in French. “*Let me go, I say!*”

“No, no,” he laughed in triumph. “You are mine—*mine!* I have brought ruin upon your miserable little country, upon your father, upon your fine château, and now, because you still defy me—I bring it upon you!”

“*Bien!* And what do you intend?” she asked.

“I intend to take you out yonder, into the street, and to hand you over to the tender mercies of those most unpolite troops of Germany—the Bavarians. There are three thousand in the town, and they are having a really reckless time—I can assure you.”

“You hell-scoundrel!” cried the poor girl in her frantic, almost insane terror. “You—you who have sat at our table and eaten with us—you, whom my father has trusted, and to whom my mother has sent presents at Noël. Ah! I now see you unmasked, yet you——”

“Enough!” cried the fellow, springing upon her and putting his thick, loose lips to hers. “A last kiss, and then you go to the fate which every Belgian woman goes to-day where our Kaiser and his troops are victorious,” and he kissed her though she still struggled fiercely to evade his grasp.

Suddenly both started, for in the room sounded a loud deafening report.

Aimée started and drew back, breathless and

shocked, for from that hated face thrust into hers, before her, one eye disappeared. The hateful face receded, the body reeled and suddenly falling backward, rolled over the stone flags of the kitchen.

A bullet had entered the eye of Arnaud Rigaux, and, passing through his brain, had taken away a portion of his skull, causing instant death. That left eye, as he reeled and fell backwards, was blotted out, for it was only a clot of blood.

"Aimée!" shouted a voice.

The girl, startled, turned to encounter a man in a grey uniform—a German infantryman! He wore a small round grey cap, and in its front the little circular cockade of blue and white—the mark of the Bavarian.

"Aimée!"

The girl stared into the face of her rescuer.

It was Edmond—Edmond—*her own dear Edmond*—and dressed as a Bavarian!

"The infernal spy!" he cried in a hard, rough voice. "I caught the fellow just in time, my darling. For two years past I have known the truth—that in addition to being our worst enemy—he has also been a traitor to our King and country, and your father's false friend."

"But Edmond!" gasped the girl, staring at him like one in a dream. "Why are you here—dressed as a German?"

"Hush!" he whispered. "If I am caught I shall be shot as a spy! I must not talk, or I may betray myself. Come with me. We must get back at once to the Belgian line."

"But—but how?" she gasped, for now the truth

had dawned upon her—the truth of the great risk her lover ran in penetrating to the invested town.

“Come with me. Have no fear, my darling. If God wills that we die, we will at least die together. Come,” he whispered, “appear as though you go with me unwillingly, or somebody may suspect us. Come along now,” he shouted, and taking her wrist roughly pretended to drag her forth into the street, where dead men and women were lying about in the roadway, and the houses only a few yards away were already ablaze.

He dragged her along that narrow street, so full of haunting horrors, urging her beneath his breath to pretend a deadly hatred of him. They passed crowds of drunken Germans. Some were smashing in windows with the butt ends of their rifles, and pouring petrol into the rooms from cans which others carried. Others were dragging along women and girls, or forcing them to march before them at the points of bayonets, and laughing immoderately at the terror such proceeding caused.

A swaggering young officer of the Seventieth Regiment of the Rhine staggered past them with a champagne bottle in his hand. He addressed some command to Edmond Valentin.

For a second Aimée’s heart stood still. But Edmond, seeing that the lieutenant was intoxicated, merely saluted and passed on, hurrying round the corner into the square where, against the wall near the church, they saw a line of bodies—the bodies of those innocent townspeople whom the bloodthirsty horde had swept out of existence with their machine-guns.

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On every side ugly stains of blood showed upon the stones. A dark red stream trickled slowly into the gutters, so awful had been the massacre an hour before.

As they crossed the square they witnessed a frightful scene. Some men and women, who had hidden in a cellar, were driven out upon the pavement ruthlessly, and shot down. The officer who gave the order, smoking a cigarette and laughing the while.

Aimée stood for a second with closed eyes, not bearing to witness such a fearful sight. Those shrill cries of despair from the terrified women and children rang in her ears for a moment. Then the rifles crackled, and there were no more cries—only a huddled heap of dead humanity.

Edmond dragged her forward. German soldiers whom they passed laughed merrily at the conquest apparently made by one of their comrades.

And as they went by the ruined church, and out upon the road towards Leffe, the scene of pillage and drunkenness that met their eyes, was indeed revolting.

Though the Belgian Government has since issued an official report to the Powers concerning the wild orgies of that awful day in Dinant, the story, in all its true hideousness, will, perhaps, never be known. Those seven hundred or so poor creatures who could testify to the fiendish torture practised upon them: how some were mutilated, outraged, bound, covered with straw and burned alive, and even buried alive, are all in their graves, their lips, alas! sealed for ever.

Another officer, a major of the Seventeenth Uhlans, rode past, and Edmond saluted. They were, indeed, treading dangerous ground.

If Edmond were discovered, both he and she would be shot as spies against the nearest wall.

How she refrained from fainting she knew not. But she bore that terrible ordeal bravely, her spirit sustained by her great, boundless love for the man at her side.

The road they had taken led by the river-bank, and just as a body of Uhlans had clattered past, raising a cloud of dust, they saw across the hills at Bouvigne, a heliograph at work, signalling towards Namur.

Above them a Taube aeroplane was slowly circling.

CHAPTER XVII

IN DEADLY PERIL

NOT only was Dinant itself being decimated, but in the Faubourg of Leffe, through which they were now passing, the German soldiers, the majority of them infantrymen wearing on their caps the green and white cockade denoting that they were from Saxony, including also many from Baden, were busy pillaging the houses, and in one spot an officer had drawn up a number of terrified women and children, and was compelling them to cry "*Vive l'Allemagne!*"

Each house, after being sacked, was systematically burned down.

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In safety they passed through all the terrors which filled the little place, yet in fear each moment of detection. But the soldiers and officers seemed so intent upon their fell work of wanton destruction that, happily, no notice was taken of the fugitives. At last they gained the high road which, following the bend of the Meuse, ran in the direction of Namur. Ten miles or so beyond lay the German front, and that would have to be passed, if they were to escape with their lives.

On the road were many German soldiers, and passing them constantly were rumbling guns, ammunition wagons, and motor-cars containing staff-officers.

Aimée knew the roads in the vicinity well, and in a whisper suggested that they should turn off into a narrow lane on the right. She knew of a path which led through the wood to a village called Assesse, she said.

"Assesse!" echoed her lover. "You know the way, darling! *Bien*, it is near that place we must get. Close by there I hid my Belgian uniform, and dressed in these clothes—clothes I took from a Bavarian shot by us while on outpost duty."

They turned into the lane, where they found themselves alone.

"I think," the girl said, "that it would be best if we did not walk together. We might be suspected. I will go ahead, and you follow me. It is nearly five miles, but when we enter the wood the path is quite straight, through two other woods and over a brook—until we reach the village."

"Very well, dearest," he said, reluctantly obliged to admit that her advice was sound. He would certainly stand a better chance of escape alone, now they were in the open country over which the Germans were swarming, than if they were together. Yet neither could disguise from themselves the fact that their lives now hung by a single thread.

Should any soldier they met accost Edmond, then he would certainly be betrayed, and death would, most assuredly, be their lot.

Having parted, however, the girl, dusty, dishevelled, and hatless, went forward, he following her at a short distance, in fear lest she might fall into the hands of one of the Prussian brutes.

At last, however, they came to the wood, but both noticed that, near by, were half a dozen Uhlans drawn up on outpost duty. They quickly caught sight of the girl, but regarded her as harmless, and then, when Edmond came swinging along, they allowed him also to pass, believing him to be one of their comrades-in-arms.

Within the wood they were practically safe, and had hurried forward a couple of miles, when Aimée suddenly heard voices and loud laughter ahead. A number of Uhlans were riding in single file up the path in their direction, therefore, in an instant she dashed away into the undergrowth until they had passed, an example followed by Edmond.

Then, when the enemy had gone, they once more went forward again, but full of caution lest they should be taken by surprise.

Those five miles were the longest either of them had ever covered, for every yard was full of breath-

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less terror. They knew not where an outpost might be lurking, for they were gradually approaching the Belgian front.

It was nearly two o'clock in the afternoon when, on emerging from the wood into the hot sunshine again, they found themselves above a tiny white-washed village, with slated roofs and ~~the~~ a church spire—the village of Assesse.

This place they carefully avoided lest it should be occupied by the enemy, but approaching a field not far away, Edmond said :

"See yonder ! darling, that old black shed. In there, my uniform is hidden beneath some straw. Until night comes on I dare not change."

"Then let us hide in the shed till night," she suggested. "You can change after dark, and we can then go forward."

He sighed. The situation was, he knew, critical.

"You know the risk we shall run, darling. Are you really prepared for it ?"

"I will face any danger at your side, Edmond. You have saved my life to-day, remember, and at imminent risk of your own."

"Because I love you, my own darling," was his quick response. "I have thought only of you, and of you alone. I must save you, and God will surely assist me in so doing."

"Yes. We are in His hands," she declared fervently. "Let us go over yonder, and hide till it grows dark."

"But you must be hungry," he suggested.

"No, Edmond," she laughed. "Don't think of me—think of yourself, of your own safety."

So they crept forward, unobserved, until they reached the shed—a mere shelter for cows. In one corner of the dirty place lay a great heap of mouldering straw, and Edmond, having worked away until he had made a hole large enough to admit them both, they both crept in and lightly covered themselves.

And then, as she found herself in his strong arms, she felt his fond kisses raining upon her brow, fierce, passionate caresses, that told her plainly how deep and how sacred was his great love for her—how strong was his affection and devotion.

For seven long hours they remained there, conversing in whispers, he recounting to her the various engagements in which he had been since the outbreak of the war.

He explained to her, too, how by reason of a law-case brought to him by a client, his suspicions had, two years before, been aroused that Arnaud Rigaux, the great Brussels financier, was a secret agent of the German Government. For months he had watched closely until, only a fortnight before the war, Rigaux's suspicions had been aroused that he was being watched. The spy feared him—feared lest he should go to the Minister of War and disclose his suspicions. This course, however, Edmond had hesitated to take.

“Why?” asked Aimée. “Was it not your duty to tell the truth?”

“It was my duty, I admit. But had I done so, you, dearest, not knowing the true facts, would have believed me guilty of trying to remove my rival by an underhand method. I should

have lost your esteem. Therefore I preferred to wait until I could strike an effective blow, and, still, at the same time, reveal to you that I had just cause for so doing."

"Your just cause was revealed to-day, Edmond," she said. "You have avenged our country, which that mean, despicable spy sought to undermine and destroy, and at the same time, dear, you saved me."

"I had no idea that the scoundrel was in Dinant, watching the wanton work of his Prussian friends. He hated Belgium, and all Belgians, and so he went, I suppose, to witness a scene of destruction unparalleled in modern history.

Last night, after we had been driven back over the hills, I resolved at all hazards to return to you; therefore, as I have explained, I took the clothes from a dead Bavarian and succeeded in passing the German outposts just before the dawn. It was an exciting journey back to Dinant, I can assure you," and he smiled grimly.

"Ah! It must have been. And you risked your life—you are risking it now—in order to save me," she said.

Slowly the light faded and a ray of red sunset, shining in at the doorway of the shed, lit up the place with crimson light.

Suddenly they heard sounds of voices. They both held their breath.

Aimée, who knew German, heard one of the men exclaim, as they approached:

"This would, I think, be a snug place in which to spend the night, Karl."

Her heart beat quickly. She could hear it thumping.

The man's companion muttered some response gruffly, and they both entered with heavy tramp. She could see that they were tall, broad-shouldered Uh'lans, in grey braided tunics, jack boots, and helmets.

They looked around for a few seconds, whereupon the gruff-voiced man exclaimed in disgust :

"No. It's too dirty. Let us get further along. We shall surely find a better place than that."

And then they strode out, remounted their horses and rode away.

The pair in hiding drew long breaths of relief. That had, surely, been a narrow escape.

When it had grown quite dark and the rats began to scamper, Edmond, foraging about, discovered his torn worn-out Belgian uniform, and quickly exchanged his Bavarian dress for his own clothes. Then he having carefully stolen out and reconnoitred, they both crept away across the fields to where the trees of a plantation showed like a black, jagged line against the night sky.

In his Belgian uniform Edmond Valentin was now in even greater danger than before, for at any moment they might be challenged, when he would, assuredly, be shot.

But, keeping closely in the shadows, they went on until they gained the plantation. The night was close and oppressive. In the distance, every now and then could be heard the thunder of guns, while in the sky before them, the long straight beams of the searchlights, sweeping backwards and forwards,

showed the direction of the Belgian front, now that they had retired from the Meuse.

"I left the regiment about three miles from the edge of this wood," Edmond whispered. "They were yonder, where that second searchlight is showing. But probably they have retired further, towards Namur, or our outposts would certainly have been here. We must have a care, and avoid the German sentries."

Then they crept forward and entered the dark, silent plantation. There was not a breath of wind, not a leaf stirred, hence their footsteps sounded loudly as they stole forward, holding their breath, and halting every now and then to listen.

Once they heard voices—men speaking in German and laughing. Even the scent of tobacco reached their nostrils. They halted, drew back and waited, so escaping detection.

That was truly a weird and exciting night adventure, for they were now very near the German outposts. They could see the twinkling lights of camp-fires upon a hill-side on their right, and once the far-off sound of a bugle fell upon their ears.

Presently they emerged from the plantation, and Edmond, having paused for a few moments to take his bearings, struck off down a narrow lane, where the trees overhung until their branches met above. For nearly a mile further they went along, leaving the roadway whenever they heard the tramp of soldiers approaching, and once very narrowly running right into the arms of a German sentry, who was standing hidden in the shadow of a haystack. It was only by drawing up suddenly, bending behind a bush,

and waiting through some ten minutes of breathless agony, that they were able to extricate themselves from a very tight corner.

And at last, when they were able to creep forward unseen, they again found themselves almost beneath the hoofs of a cavalry patrol, riding along across some open pasture-land.

When that further danger had passed, Edmond whispered to his beloved.

"We have, I believe, passed the German outposts now, dearest. Yet we must be very careful. We may not have got quite through yet. Come, we will cross that low hill yonder. No, the valley, perhaps, will be best," he added. "I see there's a farmhouse on the hill. The Uhlans may be there—in quarters for the night. We must avoid that."

So they descended over the grass land, where the country dipped towards the low ridge of hills, beyond which lay the Belgians on the defensive.

A few moments later they found themselves in a field of standing corn which had, alas! been sadly trampled by the enemy, and still crept along in the shadow of a high bank. On their right ran a shallow brook, rippling musically over the stones, one of those many trout streams, the undisturbed haunt of the heron, with which the picturesque Ardennes abound.

All was quiet, and nobody appeared to be in the vicinity. Yet Edmond knew that the whole of the enemy's lines must be so well patrolled that it would be most difficult for them to escape across to the Belgians with their lives.

The German sentry system is as near perfect as

the military brain can render it. Not a cat could slip by the German lines, now that they were advancing to the conquest.

Still he had come through on the previous night, and he was bent, for the sake of Aimée, upon getting her back safely. Of a sudden, a voice sounded a short distance away—a loud gruff expression in German.

The pair drew up and waited, holding their breath.

Straight before them the long, bright beam of a searchlight was slowly sweeping the sky, searching for German aeroplanes.

The men were against a line of bushes.

"Be careful, Edmond!" whispered the girl
"They are coming this way."

But they were not, for they could see that the dark figures silhouetted against the night sky were receding.

Straight before them was another dark copse, which led up the side of the low hill.

When the Germans had gone, Aimée and her lover crept forward noiselessly, making their way to the cover afforded by the copse which, Edmond had concluded, lay between the opposing lines.

They had, however, not gone more than a hundred yards when a German sentry sprang suddenly forth from the shadow, with fixed bayonet, and uttered a loud, gruff challenge in German.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

Aimée, startled, drew back in terror, clinging to her lover's arm. But only for a second. Then she drew herself up again, and stood motionless at his side.

"Who goes there?" again demanded the sentry, in a tone of quick suspicion. "Come forward," he commanded in an imperious voice "Who are you?"

Neither spoke. In their ignorance they were walking right into the enemy's camp!

They were entrapped!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GULF OF SHADOWS

"We must fly for our lives, Aimée!" her lover whispered. "Follow me!"

"*Bien!* I am ready!" she answered, quite cool in that moment of their supreme peril. The terrors of that day had not unnerved her, because of Edmond's presence.

She thought only of him.

Between where they stood there, half concealed by the low bushes and the dark shadow of the copse before them, was a distance of some ten yards, or so. To escape, they must make a dash across that small open space.

The German sentry repeated his challenge loudly.

Not an instant was now to be lost. It was a matter of life or death.

"Now, darling!" cried Edmond, and together they held their breath and together sped towards the copse.

Next instant a rifle flashed, and there was a loud

report, followed, a second later, by another sharp shot, and then another, and yet another.

The alarm had been given, and, in a moment, the whole line of the enemy's sentries were on the alert.

Année heard the bullets scream past her as she ran.

She heard, too, Edmond gasp and ejaculate an expression of surprise. But until they were safe in the copse, speeding along together as fast as their feet could carry them, she was unaware that her lover's right arm was hanging limp and useless—that he had received an ugly wound through the shoulder.

"Why!" she gasped in dismay, pulling up suddenly. "You are hurt—dearest! You are wounded!" In the darkness she felt some warm sticky fluid upon her hand

"It's nothing, really, Année. Just a graze—that's all," he declared. "Come, for Heaven's sake. Let us get on, or we may yet be caught! Our own outposts must be somewhere close by. Let us hope they are beyond this copse. Come—let us hurry—*hurry!*"

Those final words of his were uttered because he felt his strength giving way, and before he fell exhausted, as he must do, he meant still to strive with his last effort to place his beloved in safety.

She, noticing that his voice had somehow changed, and knowing that the blood was streaming from his shoulder, took his left arm and assisted him stealthily along.

Suddenly, by a mere chance, they struck a narrow path in the darkness, and this led them to the further end of the copse.

Scarcely, however, had they come out into the open, when another voice challenged them loudly—*in French!*

Those words, startling them for a second, caused them next moment to gasp with relief.

Edmond answered the challenge cheerily, and they walked forward to where stood the friendly Belgian outpost. In a few quick words Valentin explained to the cavalryman how they had passed through the German lines, but being suspicious of spies, the man, quite rightly, called up four of his comrades, and then both fugitives were conducted along a high road for a considerable distance to the Belgian camp.

Before General Thalmann, commanding the Sixth Brigade, seated in his tent, Edmond Valentin quickly established the fact that he was no spy, and, indeed, he was able to give some very valuable information regarding the disposition of the enemy, and related for the first time, the terrible story of the sack and destruction of Dinant.

The grey-moustached General, having complimented him upon his gallant conduct and his wonderful escape, ordered him to at once have his wound dressed. Then, rising from his camp-chair, he bowed politely to Aimée, saying :

“I also wish to offer my heartiest congratulations to you, Mademoiselle, upon your providential escape from Dinant. I allow you to accompany *Sous-officier* Valentin to the Base Hospital. Captain Dulac, he added, turning to one of his officers present, please sign the necessary order. And note that I bestow the highest praise upon *Sous-officier* Valentin, of the Eighth Chasseurs, for penetrating into the

enemy's lines and obtaining much valuable intelligence."

"I may add, General, that I discovered, in Dinant, the Brussels financier, Arnaud Rigaux, dressed as a German Major, and, having myself proved that he was a spy, shot him!"

"You shot Arnaud Rigaux!" exclaimed the General, staring at him. "Is that true?"

"Yes, m'sieur."

"You are quite certain of this?"

"Quite certain. Mademoiselle was present."

"Then please make a note of that also, Captain Dulac," the commander said. "Only yesterday I received word from headquarters that he was to be captured, and wherever found, sent for trial by court-martial at Antwerp. So you, Valentin, it seems, have put a sudden end to this man's dastardly career—eh?" and the well-set-up, grey-moustached man—one of Belgium's bravest generals—grinned with satisfaction. "Well, I congratulate you, and you may rest assured that your distinguished services will not go unrewarded. *Bon soir, Mademoiselle—Bon soir, Valentin.*"

And the pair were then led forth from the tent, away to that of the medical service, where a doctor quickly investigated Edmond's wound.

Aimée, fortunately perhaps, remained outside, for scarcely had her lover entered the tent, than he fell fainting. Restoratives were quickly administered, and the bullet was extracted under an anæsthetic, while she waited in patience outside. Edmond's wound was, alas! of a far more serious character than the gallant soldier of Belgium had at first believed.

In consequence of medical advice he was sent, next day, by tram to the military hospital in Antwerp, Aimée, by order of the general, being allowed to accompany him in the military train.

From Antwerp Aimée was able to communicate with both her mother and father, and a fortnight after her arrival there she received, with intense satisfaction, the joyful news that they had both met at Ostend, and had gone to London, Brussels being, of course, in the hands of the enemy.

The Baroness wrote several times, urging her daughter to come to London—to the Langham Hotel, where they had taken up their temporary quarters—but the girl replied that she would not leave Edmond's side, she having volunteered as a Red Cross nurse at the St. Elizabeth Hospital.

For over a month Edmond Valentin, eager to return to the front and to still bear his part in the fighting, lay in his narrow bed in the long ward now filled to overflowing with wounded. His shoulder had been shattered, and more than one medical consultation had been held regarding it.

Aimée, in her neat uniform as nurse, with the big scarlet cross upon the breast of her white apron, had learned the sad truth—that, in all probability, Edmond might never be able to use his right arm again, though no one had told him the painful fact.

As he lay there he was ever dreaming of going back to again work that innocent-looking little machine-gun of his, which had sent to their deaths so many of the Huns of the Kaiser.

The bitter truth was, however, told to him one day. The enemy, under General von Bäseler, were advancing upon Antwerp. They had destroyed Malines, and were almost at the gates of Belgium's principal port. It was the third day in October, and British troops had now arrived to assist in the defence of Antwerp. All the wounded who could walk were ordered to leave.

And so it happened that Edmond Valentin, accompanied by Aimée, resolved at last to escape to London, where the girl could rejoin her parents.

With a huge crowd of refugees of all classes, the pair, ever faithful to each other—yet, be it said, greatly to Edmond's regret—crossed one grey wintry afternoon to Dover, where, on the pier, the pair were met by the Baron and Baroness, and carried with delight to that haven of the stricken—that sanctuary of the war—London.

The gallant conduct of the *Sous-officier* of Belgian Chasseurs, in a shabby blue military great-coat, worn and torn, and with the right arm bandaged across his chest, had reached England through the Press long before. In the papers there had been brief accounts of his fearless penetration into the enemy's lines, and the gallant rescue of the woman he so dearly loved. King Albert had bestowed upon him the Cross of the Order of Leopold, and his photograph—together with that of Aimée—had been published in many of the newspapers.

Little wonder was it, therefore, that a little over a month later—on that well-remembered day in November when the British monitors from the sea assisted the Belgians and our own troops in the

splendid defence of the Straits of Dover—newspaper reporters and photographers stood so eagerly upon that long flight of stone steps which lead up to the entrance of St Martin's Church, in Trafalgar Square, where a wedding of Belgian refugees was to take place.

The happy couple emerged from the church at last man and wife, and Edmond Valentin, still in his shabby dark blue great-coat, and with his arm bandaged, did not escape the ubiquitous photographers any more than did Aimée de Neuville—now little Madame Valentin.

But both were modest in the happy dénouement of the great human drama, preferring to remain blissful in each other's love, rather than to court any further publicity.

True, most of the newspapers next day,—and especially the illustrated ones,—reported that the wedding had taken place, but there was only the vaguest hint of the real and actual romance which I have—perhaps somewhat indiscreetly—attempted to describe in the foregoing pages—the romance of those terribly dramatic happenings at the Sign of the Swoild.

THE END *

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